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IN SECRET PLACES.

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A Nobel.

BY

ROBERT J. GRIFFITHS, LL.D.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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IN SECRET PLACES.



CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT TRAGEDY.

ONCE more the solemn hush of night had fallen upon the hills, and nature was at rest. It was a calm, pleasant night, with scarcely a breath of air in motion to disturb the peaceful serenity of the atmosphere. In the heavens the stars twinkled merrily, as if glad to show themselves on so lovely a night; but the moon was obscured by a mass of clouds, which intercepted her light.

Nine or ten miles distant from Glynarth, on the mountain, was a miserable hut, which had been originally constructed for the use

of the shepherds who occasionally led their flocks thither. It was situated close to the road which ran across the mountain from Glynarth to the county town. The spot, like all the scenery around, was a wild and lonesome one—a place that one would not care to visit even in the daytime, and which was infinitely more desolate and weird in the darkness of the night.

One evening—the evening which we have described—voices might have been heard issuing from this hut. Two men had been lying there since early morning, and were still there—waiting, apparently, for some one who did not come. One was middle-aged, but the other was a mere youth; and both were carefully muffled up and disguised. They sat upon blocks of stone, and smoked their pipes, trying to spend the time as cheerfully as possible. They were Henry Emmerson and Edward Hughes.

Not far off was Mrs. Montessor in another similar hut, although Edward knew nothing of her proximity. She, too, had been wait-

ing all day, thirsting for the blood of this man, who was so long in coming, and dreading lest he might have selected some other route.

She had not hastily taken this guilt upon her soul. She had sent to him, offering to resign the estate if a handsome allowance were made her; but the sum he was prepared to give was not a sixth part of that which she demanded, and she therefore had determined to keep the whole, if she could. Edmund Montessor did not come through Abernant, but for some reason or other he went to the county town, where he had been for a week; and it was during his stay there the negotiation took place which failed completely in arranging matters amicably.

He was coming to Glynarth now, armed, no doubt, with sufficient evidence to establish his claim; and unless he were intercepted and checked, half the village would recognise him on the morrow, and her power would be for ever gone. What if this attempt failed, however? How dreadful

would her position be ! He would, of course, leap to the conclusion that she had planned and instigated the attack upon him, and he would set himself to seek out evidence against her ; and he might succeed. She had read of persons being convicted on less convincing evidence than could be procured against her ; and the cold perspiration stood in great drops upon her brow as she thought of so fearful a possibility.

Leaving her to her dark and unenviable thoughts, let us return to the hut where the two actors in the coming tragedy were lying in wait. Emmerson was outwardly calm, and even gay ; but in his heart he was nervous and frightened. During a long course of villainy he had never engaged in anything which involved the shedding of blood, and he was fully conscious of the terrible danger he was incurring ; and besides this there was a faint suspicion in his soul that this deed of guilt would cling to him for ever, and would embitter every pleasure in life, and destroy every hope

after life had passed from his possession. The seeds of the long, remorseful misery he was to endure were already within him.

Externally, however, there were no traces of these feelings. He endeavoured to rally his companion's drooping spirits, and to cheer him up; for the youth was beginning to regret the compact into which he had entered. It would be much better, he thought, to be in his warm bed at the Glyn, honest and upright, than shivering in a wretched shepherd's hut on the mountain, waiting for a man who had done him no wrong, but who was, nevertheless, to be robbed and plundered.

"I wish I were out of this," he said, drearily; "it is not nearly so pleasant a job as you described."

"My dear fellow, don't be melancholy," said his companion, of whom nothing could be seen through the darkness except the glowing tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. "You will be all right to-morrow, when

you get back to Abernant, or somewhere else, with your pockets lined with money.”

“I shall never be able to forget how I came by it,” said the youth, shivering, but not with cold this time.

“Nonsense; that’s how youngsters always feel in starting upon the profession,” said Emmerson, encouragingly. “You’ll get over that delusion in a very short time, my boy, and take to it first-rate. Drink this, for you are as funky as a fellow making his first proposal.”

Edward almost drained the brandy in the flask which was offered to him; and the blood flowed quicker through his veins, and his courage revived, as the fiery stimulant began to take effect upon him.

“We won’t get into trouble, I suppose,” he said, with a reckless laugh. “This is a safe job, is it not, Emmerson?”

“The safest I ever was in,” replied that worthy. “We *can’t* get into trouble in any way; and we will make a good thing of it too, I expect.”

They relapsed into silence, both smoking vigorously. This lasted for about half an hour; and then Edward struck a match, and looked at his watch. It was half-past eleven.

“He won’t come to-night,” he said; and a feeling of relief took possession of him as he expressed this opinion. “It is getting near midnight, and it is no use stopping here all night.”

“He is sure to come,” replied Emmerson, positively. “If, however, he doesn’t come in another hour we’ll go.”

Satisfied with this assurance, the youth sat down again, whilst his associate passed out into the open air. He tried to pierce the thick darkness which hung upon the landscape like a funereal pall, but he could see nothing. Everything was perfectly still.

He dropped upon the ground, and applied his ear to the earth. After lying there a few minutes, he could detect the slow footsteps of some one coming along the road in the direction from whence Edmund

Montessor was expected. He had not been sure until now whether the unfortunate young man would be riding or walking. He was evidently on foot, and this circumstance rendered his task much simpler.

He summoned Edward, and bade him listen to their approaching victim. The youth dropped on the ground, as Emmerson had done previously, and footsteps were distinctly audible.

“He is coming!” he said, in a voice trembling with suppressed excitement; “he will be here almost directly. Is everything ready, Emmerson?”

“Yes; everything,” replied his companion, to whom it occurred at that moment that he would find it difficult to show the body to Mrs. Montessor without betraying her presence to Edward. “Go over to the other side of the road, and lie down behind the hedge. Do not utter even the slightest whisper, but lie perfectly still until you hear my signal. When you hear me move you rush out also, and help me to seize him.”

He did not wish the youth to see his weapons and his grim preparations, and he also wished to go over to communicate with Mrs. Montessor before the victim's arrival.

With a beating heart Edward crossed the road, and threw himself on the ground behind the embankment, which served for a hedge. He could see nothing of Emmerson or his movements, and he could only wait in anxious silence for the coming traveller.

Meanwhile Emmerson crept away beneath the shadow of the embankment, and, after going a little distance, he made off across the field, and then through another, until he reached the place where Mrs. Montessor was waiting impatiently for his coming.

"Is he approaching?" she asked, as he entered the hut.

"Yes; he is close at hand," he replied; "he will be here in a few minutes; and I came over to tell you, and to ask you for the last time—before it becomes too late for ever—whether you are determined

to take this man's life. You know as well as I do the consequences if it is discovered, and, therefore, I bid you to weigh well your answer. Must he die?"

She was never so much inclined to withdraw from her desperate position as at that moment. She had counted the cost during those long hours of waiting, and she was inclined to give up the contest. At that moment of yielding, however, a rush of angry, cruel thoughts crowded upon her mind, and her face darkened again with evil passions.

"He must die, Emmerson," she said; "there is no safety for us whilst he is alive."

"If you are determined upon it, well and good," he replied. "There is that boy Hughes, too, that I wished to speak about. How are you to see the—the body whilst he is there?"

"Send him away on some pretence or other," she replied; "tell him to go to a little distance to keep watch—do anything—but I must see *him*."

He had no time to linger longer, but hurried back again to his post. The footsteps were very near now, and the traveller appeared to be weary and tired, for his pace was slow and heavy. Emmerson thought within himself that in a few moments more he would have reached the long rest! He cocked his pistol, and lying upon the embankment, waited until he would be able to take an accurate aim. On came the unsuspecting pedestrian, little dreaming of the vigilant foes that were awaiting him, and at length he arrived nearly opposite the spot where Emmerson lay. A slight noise behind the embankment caused him to stop for an instant and look in that direction. The assassin could perceive through the gloom his victim's face turned towards him, and taking a steady aim at his breast, he fired!

The report rang out with startling distinctness upon the still silent night, and almost at the same instant a loud scream of agony burst from the lips of the wounded

man, who pressed his right hand upon his breast, and then fell backwards upon the ground.

The moment Edward heard the report, the awful peril of his position, and the full significance of the crime which had just been perpetrated, flashed across his brain. He was, if not a murderer, at least the accomplice of one; and goaded almost to madness by this reflection, he dashed from his hiding-place into the roadway, and reached the fallen man before Emmerson. He dropped on his knees by his side and glanced at the white face before him. Death was written upon every lineament. The lips and eyes were closed, and a terrible expression of intense agony was visible. He was dead—there could be no doubt of that; and Edward sprang up from the ground to see Emmerson advancing towards him with the discharged pistol in his hand. The youth could bear the dreadful scene no longer, and, with a cry of horror, he fled away. In vain did Emmerson call

upon him to stop, and even threatened to fire upon him; no entreaty, no inducement—not untold gold poured out at his feet—could have prevailed upon him to remain longer in the company of a murderer! In a few minutes he had completely disappeared, and Emmerson gnashed his teeth with rage and fear. He had not the least doubt but that Edward would at once give information of the murder, and that he would be apprehended in consequence; and a man with the hangman's noose dangling over his head might well feel alarmed.

He stooped over the dead man, and laid his hand upon his breast. There was no pulsation! He took one of its hands in his—it was not yet grown cold; but he started back with horror as he raised his own hand and found it covered with blood. He had taken his victim's right hand, which had been pressed upon the wound when he fell to the earth!

Greatly alarmed and startled, he turned away to fetch Mrs. Montessor; but she was

nearly on the spot, for she had hurried from her place of concealment upon hearing the pistol-shot. She, also, was pale and trembling, now that the guilt of murder—foul, treacherous murder—was virtually upon her head.

“Is it all over?” she asked, with a faltering voice, as he came to meet her.

“Yes,” he replied, gruffly, in order to conceal the fear and dread which was racking him; “he is as dead as a stone, but we are in a serious mess for all that. The lad has run away, and will, no doubt, give information about the affair.”

Her face grew still paler as she heard this startling intelligence. Were all her plots and schemes to be crushed at the outset, and the crime which she had planned and instigated to be so quickly avenged? The thought was agonizing, and yet she saw no hope of escape. Edward would, no doubt, denounce Emmerson to the authorities; what was there to induce him to hold his tongue? Simply nothing; for he was

not implicated in it, and had been deceived from beginning to end in the matter. It was almost certain, if not quite, therefore, that Emmerson would be arrested, and she had no faith in his constancy and regard for her—no hope whatever that he would shield her, even though he could not save himself.

These reflections coursed with the rapidity of lightning through her brain, but she did not utter a word. She only moved towards the dead man with a dazed, bewildered expression upon her countenance, that showed how utterly stunned she was by the sudden blow which had fallen upon her.

She gazed upon the face, horrible in the contortions of the death-struggle, and, stooping, down, she drew away some stray locks of hair from his countenance. It was Edmund Montessor, unquestionably. He was rather handsomer than his portrait represented him to be, and there was a strong resemblance to his uncle, her late husband. He was very good-looking, and his face appeared too open and fearless, too

young and handsome, to be still and cold in death—even she who was virtually his destroyer felt that! She turned away at last, sick at heart, her trembling limbs almost refusing to support her weight. Emmerson was at hand, however, and saw her weakness.

“You are not quite well,” he said, in a kinder manner than was his wont; “this is not a fit place for you, and you must go home at once. The work is all over now, and your estate is perfectly safe.”

“Safe! yes, but am I safe, or you either?” she asked, in a choking voice; “if you are arrested I cannot trust to your good faith to shield me.”

He made no reply, but drew her arm within his own, and led her away in the direction of Glynarth. Presently, when he had taken her fairly away from the scene of the tragedy, he would return to dispose of the body, but, in the meantime, it might remain on the high road, for no one was likely to disturb it.

“You are exciting yourself needlessly

about this lad," he said, persuasively ; " he will, no doubt, reveal the whole thing to the police, but I do not intend being caught. When I have made away with the body I shall follow you to Montessor House, and you must give me two hundred pounds to enable me to reach the Continent. As soon as you can raise the money, you must send me four thousand eight hundred pounds, making altogether five thousand pounds as my reward. Unless you carry out this arrangement, I swear I will denounce you to the authorities."

" I am quite willing to accept your terms," she replied, secretly surprised at his moderation ; " there is one condition I will attach to them, however. If you are arrested, you must not betray me. Swear that you will not do so."

" I swear it," he said emphatically ; " you are perfectly safe ; but if it should happen—which is not likely to be the case—that this fellow does not betray me, you must carry out the original contract."

“We will not speak of that to-night,” she replied. “Leave me now; I am quite able to go home alone, and you have work to do. Put *it* out of the way effectually.”

He left her, promising to follow her as quickly as possible; and, wondering what he should do with the body, bent his steps towards the fatal spot. He had purposely conveyed a spade and a pickaxe to the hut in order that he might dig a grave; and if he had been alone, he would have prepared one during the long hours of waiting which he had undergone. As it was, it would be necessary to convey the body to some distance from the road; and then to make the grave so carefully that it would not be easy to discover it in the search which he had no doubt would be made. He was perfectly sensible that the discovery of the body would tend greatly to criminate him; and he was, therefore, extremely anxious to conceal it as effectually as possible.

Cogitating thus, he returned to the place where he had left the body; and here

another great shock awaited him, that almost froze the blood in his veins, and made his eyes to dilate with horror.

The body had completely disappeared !

There was no trace left behind ; not even the slightest stain of blood upon the road. It had disappeared so completely, that he almost doubted whether it had ever been there, and began to think that the events of the night were only parts of a hideous dream. Perhaps he had mistaken the spot ; it might be a little higher up ; but no : here was the hut in which he and Edward lay concealed, and he could even see the impress of his own body upon the embankment as he lay in waiting. Where, then, could the body be ? That was the question which well-nigh drove him distracted, and intensified the horror which was deepening in his soul.

Whoever had taken it away, could not have removed it very far, and he commenced a search in the surrounding fields, but his efforts resulted only in disappointment. The body had disappeared as com-

pletely as if it had dissolved away into the surrounding darkness. For two or three hours he wandered about in every direction, and at last he sat down upon the earth filled with utter despair. The gallows stood out with horrible distinctness in his mind, and seemed to be burning itself upon his brain. The plot which had been so carefully planned and matured had ended in nothing but disaster and impending ruin; he had stained his soul with indelible guilt; and all for nothing! Worse than nothing; for his own life was scarcely worth three months' purchase!

He was needlessly increasing his danger, however, by remaining there; and, urged by the instinct of self-preservation, he went away, taking his tools with him, and bent his steps towards Glynarth.

"I will not tell her of this last event," he mused; "she might refuse to pay me the money; and, in that case, what am I to do? I should be taken like a rat in a trap. Not that I think she would refuse to help

me, for my arrest would be fatal to her; but she would not give anything like the sum I want, because she would see, of course, that I would rather take anything than be caught. The fellow was quite dead, so I needn't tell her anything about it."

He reached Montessor House, and, after a few minutes' interview with Mrs. Montessor, he departed; and utterly wearied and depressed, she retired to her room, but not to rest. Rest! Is there any rest when a dead face, horrible in its cold, rigid stillness, appeared ever before her eyes in the silence and gloom of her chamber? Rest! When she knew that ever through all the years of the future the memory of that foul deed would haunt her sleeping and waking hours, never for a moment leaving her? No; whatever the future might have in store for her, it had no rest, no peace—only misery, dread, and remorse!

CHAPTER II.

A BRUISED FLOWER.

ANNIE'S life in her peaceful home flowed on in its even calm course, dimmed, however, by the shadow of the great sorrow which had fallen upon her. Outwardly the girl was much the same as before. She performed her little household duties in the same placid manner. She listened to the little troubles of the old women who were dependent upon her as patiently as ever, only her smile had something of sadness in it, and her bright face was overclouded by a melancholy air that was perceptible to all.

In the first gush of happiness caused by the great joy which had entered into her life, she had secret misgivings sometimes

that the happy present might merge into a troubled future, and that so bright a period could never last; but not even in those moments of doubt and misgiving had she ever dreamt of the crushing blow which was impending over her. When it descended she was stunned and dazed. She could scarcely realize the extent of her loss, and, utterly bewildered, she could do nothing but sit for hours in a kind of stupor, musing in a half-unconscious way respecting the brother who had gone astray. Even her lover sank out of sight in the presence of this great trouble, for she could think of nothing, dream of nothing, but of her brother. She would sit at the window with folded arms, gazing out into her small garden, but seeing none of the flowers which bloomed there. She saw only a fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, who had accompanied her up the valley, morning after morning, to the village national school—who had shared her dinner with her in the play-ground at noon, and who had returned home in her hand in

the evening. Ah! how well she remembered the help she was wont to give him with his tasks, for he never had a head for book-learning, as the simple country folks termed it, and how he was accustomed to appeal to her in all his small troubles! How many little memories of that bygone time came crowding upon her mind now that he had vanished from her sight—how many virtues and how few vices were remembered now! Then she would go up to his little room where his books and cast-off clothes still remained, and those things, which he had once handled and worn, had suddenly become almost sacred in her eyes. The first shock, however, passed away, and she began to look at matters in a more hopeful light. When small troubles fret and annoy us, it is surprising how we carry our burdens about with us, thinking of nothing else, and shutting out God's blessed sunshine from our hearts, which are filled only with anxiety and repining at the difficulties which we have to encounter. How easy it

is to shut oneself up completely from all around us, and fret and fume about our troubles as if no one in the universe ever had so sad a lot before! With a really great sorrow it is different. The probability is that the first shock will be a severe one, but then it will pass away and leave the mind in a more cheerful, hopeful state than might be thought possible. It is, in fact, easier to bear great troubles than small ones!

Thus it was with Annie. She could think of nothing at first but of the brother she had lost; and often at night she would start up from her sleep, expecting to see his face at the window, asking admission. What could he be doing throughout the long hours of the day, and where could he lay his head at night? Perhaps at the very time that she was peacefully reposing in a comfortable bed he was shivering with cold beneath some miserable hut or hedgerow. This season of deep sorrow, however, passed away, and she began to indulge a hope that, after all, her brother might have gone

to some other town, where, by completely changing his course of conduct, he might hope to succeed better. Even if this were the case, it would not remove from her the odium that his public disgrace had connected with her name; and since the occurrence she had not been in the village, for she could not endure the petty malice of the rustics; but, nevertheless, the very hope was an immense comfort to her in her desponding state of mind.

If he were doing well, however, why did he not write? or, at least, he might have communicated in some way with her. The days and weeks, however, went by, and still he made no sign, and the old despondency would often return, casting a deeper gloom upon her spirit than before.

She was sitting one day at the window, gazing wistfully out, when Frederick entered. He was at her side almost before she knew it; and he stood there with his calm, earnest eyes fixed upon her, as she glanced wistfully out, in a dreamy reverie, as if even his pre-

sence was not sufficient to charm away her melancholy. He did not utter a syllable for a few minutes, but at length he passed his hand caressingly through her long silky tresses, and asked, gently :

“What are you thinking of, Annie?”

The sound of his voice, so grave, and yet so tender, recalled her to herself, and she burst into tears.

It was not necessary to repeat his question, for he knew that her thoughts were with her brother; and gathering the weeping girl within his strong, loving embrace, he said, soothingly :

“We cannot undo the past, Annie, although we may brighten the future. Whatever your brother may have been in the past, he may become a good and useful man yet. The severe lesson he has received may do him good, and perhaps nothing less than some such event would have restrained him. In any case there is no reason whatever to despair of his reformation.”

“That is not the only thing that troubles

me, Frederick," she said, looking up into his face through her tears; "it is not right that you should ever marry the sister of a youth who has so deeply disgraced himself. Hereafter men may point with scorn at you as a grossly deceived or grossly infatuated man."

"What do you wish me to do, then?" he asked, quietly, although an amused smile, which she did not perceive, was lurking in the corners of his mouth, "am I to give you up?"

"If you please, sir," she replied, timidly and tremblingly, not knowing exactly what she ought to say. She always called him "sir" when she feared to offend him.

"It doesn't suit me, madam, to oblige you just at present," he answered, imitating her manner; "it does not please me to give you up, even if your brother had disgraced himself a hundred times over."

"People will talk so," she murmured, faintly, for she was overjoyed to find that he would not desert her.

“Let them talk if it pleases them to do so,” he said, almost sternly: “it is a hard, cruel custom that entails one man’s sin upon all his family and upon all connected with him. It is another instance of the thoughtless, selfish way in which we treat one another’s feelings, and our cool forgetfulness of all our own failings when we so readily contrive to hound another man down. One would think that there must be a good many perfect beings in the world if we were to judge by the outburst of righteous horror which is heard whenever a man breaks forth a little beyond the limit allowed by society. I will never be guided by so iniquitous a law, Annie, and you must not mention it again.”

She was but too ready to assent to his view, and her estimation of his chivalrous, noble character became higher than ever, as she listened to his generous words. It is so easy to win the gratitude of those who are in trouble by means of a little kindly sympathy.

"You are always so good and brave," she whispered, nestling still closer to his breast.

"I should be doing nothing more than my duty, my darling, even if my own inclination did not point in the same direction," he replied, affectionately. "I cannot give up my little Welsh bride, even if the whole world came between us!"

Brave words, bravely spoken, but destined to be submitted to a severe test ere long!

Their conversation went on in the same loving strain for some time longer, when, by accident, he happened to refer to her brother.

"Can nothing be done to trace him?" she asked, eagerly; "I should be so glad to hear of him, even if the tidings be evil. Any certainty, however terrible, is better than this suspense."

"I am afraid that nothing can be done to trace him," he replied, shaking his head gravely; "we must wait in hopes that, like the prodigal of old, he will again return to

his home. Have faith and patience, my darling, and do not torment yourself about that which you cannot possibly alter."

"It is easy to preach patience," she said, with a sad smile; "you would find it difficult, however, to practise if you were situated as I am. I cannot bear this awful uncertainty about Edward's fate. He may be sick or in want for aught I know—he may even be sinking deeper into sin than before—and I am quite helpless to save him. It is this that drives me almost wild sometimes, that I should be sitting idly here when he is perhaps perishing for want of food."

The utter isolation in which she dwelt had made her almost morbidly imaginative on this point. She knew nothing—absolutely nothing—of the great world and its ways, and she thought of it only as an active, overcrowded space, where men had to struggle and strain every nerve in order to keep pace with those around them; a place where all but workers were obliged to lie down and die.

“Strong young men, like your brother, need not die of want unless they choose to do so, my darling,” he said, fondly; “your little head is a great deal too full of dreadful fancies. You should get all the cobwebs brushed out of your brain, and try to enjoy yourself, instead of inflicting useless torment upon yourself in this way.”

“It is impossible—quite impossible!” she murmured.

“It is quite possible, and I will tell you how to do it,” he replied. “We will be married at once, and then you will not have much time to think about your sorrows.”

“Oh, no! I couldn’t do it! Indeed, I cannot marry you just yet,” she said, as if terrified at the bare idea; “I am a great deal too foolish and too inexperienced to be your wife. Indeed, you must not ask me to do such a thing.”

He laughed at her fears, and still urged his suit—urged it so successfully, that she was compelled to consent. After he had gained his point, he rose to go.

“I shall have you all to myself soon, my darling,” he said fondly, as he embraced her; “it must be very soon, for I cannot leave you here much longer to pine away.”

His voice almost trembled with anxiety, for as he held her in his arms he could see that care and anxiety had left their impress upon her fair face. She was paler and thinner than when he first saw her, but her beauty was enhanced and spiritualized by suffering. His heart smote him as he gazed wistfully upon her. What if he had found this fair loving flower only to lose her again? How bitterly he would regret it; how deeply he would blame himself for not taking sooner upon himself the load which had proved too heavy for her shoulders.

These were the reflections that filled his mind as he strode homewards, and he vowed to himself that in a very few weeks she should become his bride. No wind should touch the fragile flower then—no blast breathe too heavily upon her—for his love

would surround and protect her from every sorrow and trial.

Meanwhile, Annie remained in the chair where he had placed her, trying to think of the future—that future which her lover had brought so very near to her. She doubted very much whether she was fit to be the wife of the man who loved her so devotedly, and she feared that her heart was not capable of the mighty passion which he felt. Would he not become weary of her when the golden chains of matrimony had been duly riveted, and both of them grew accustomed to the yoke? The halcyon days of romance she knew perfectly well could not last for ever; indeed, she did not believe that he was a man who indulged in romantic views and feelings at all. She feared only that, coming as he did from the gay, fashionable world, he had been attracted by her fresh simple beauty, and thought he saw qualities in her which really did not exist. What, then, was she to do? If she told him clearly and frankly what she feared, he would be

angry, and would deny that he was in any way actuated by transient feelings; and, on the other hand, if she allowed things to take their course, she would be his wife before another month had passed away.

“Why cannot I be wooed and married like all the girls around?” she mused; “there is no uncertainty, no doubt in their case, and the whole affair is a very simple one. Love is not much talked about, and I don’t think many of them know what it means; yet they manage to live very happily—more happily than those who are profuse in their professions of love before marriage. I wonder why it is so.”

It was simply because they had no idea that love was necessary to make married life happy. If a young man were questioned, it would generally be found that there were four or five girls in the neighbourhood, each of whom was equally well adapted in his eyes to be his wife. It was not a question of love, but merely which of them would the most readily accept him, and

which had the most money. Love is, in fact, disappearing from the courtships of many members of the lower classes.

But to Annie love was everything. She could no more exist without it than a plant could without moisture, or man without food. Marriage, in her eyes, therefore, was considerably more than a conventional form—it was a most serious reality.

“I will ask nursesey about it,” she murmured at last; “she is sure to be able to advise me, and perhaps she knows something about Edward. I will go and see her.”

She did not wait until night, for she had no reason to conceal her visit. Everybody knew that the strange old woman in the hut on the hill-side had been her nurse, and it was but natural that she should visit her occasionally.

She reached the hollow about six o'clock, and found the hut empty. It was getting dark, and Annie was anxious to perform her errand, in order that she might return home as speedily as possible; but the old woman

came not. The girl sat down on the stool, and waited for nearly an hour before Sian made her appearance. She was not timid, for long experience had taught her that there was no danger to be apprehended in this solitary spot.

The old crone tottered in at last, carrying a bundle of firewood.

“Where have you been, nursesey dear?” asked the girl, speaking in Welsh. “I have been waiting so long here for you, and I was just about to start back again.”

“I have only been gathering some firewood,” she said, casting down her load. “What do you want here to-night, child?” she asked, anxiously. “Some trouble, I see, has happened. Your face is full of it.”

It was not a difficult matter to notice this; but by such simple artifices the old woman had gained the reputation of being a “wise woman.”

“Yes, I have had a great deal of it lately, nursesey,” she replied, sadly. “I have often thought of coming here to tell you, but I

had not the heart to do it—indeed I had not. Edward is gone, nursesey.”

“I knew that he went to Abernant, child,” she answered, rather crossly, “that is no news. Tell me something fresh. It cannot be *that* that troubles you?”

“No, it is not that,” she replied; “he went to Abernant, and he is gone from there. He fell into wild, bad ways, and his master turned him away. Then he became desperate, and ran away. I have never heard a word from him since.”

“And that is the trouble, is it?” cried the crone, crouching over the smouldering flame upon the hearthstone. “The lad was always wild and unruly; he was a bad boy—a very bad boy.”

“Nursesey, you must not say so—you shall not say so,” cried Annie, starting up indignantly; “he was not at all a bad boy, only he has been led astray by wicked companions in the town. He would have been all right if he had remained here.”

“Ah, my dear! he was up to more mis-

chief here than you ever heard of," said Sian, grimly; "he was a little bit afraid of you, my dear, and it would have been well if you had looked a little sharper after him. As it was, he was always getting into scrapes."

"What scrapes did he get into?" asked Annie, incredulously.

"He wanted to join us once," continued Sian, never heeding the interruption. "He had a notion that one day he might get into serious trouble, and that it would be a good thing for him to have a secure hiding-place like the temples of the Druids in the bowels of the earth, to which to fly. He asked me to speak to the others about him, but they would not admit him. Men of blameless lives only are allowed to enter the sacred brotherhood."

"Perhaps it was only curiosity," said Annie, who was inclined to doubt whether her brother had ever made such an application.

"No, it was not," replied Sian; "he told

me about a little trouble he was in then, and I saw at once what his object was. Why, there is not a public-house in the whole district for miles around where he has not been seen drunk more than once."

"My brother drunk!" cried Annie, incredulously.

"Yes, blind drunk," said the old crone, snappishly; "more than that, he has made love to every good-looking girl, high and low, that he ever met with."

"Nonsense, Sian!" cried Annie, incredulously. "Edward was a great deal too lazy to do half these things."

"He appeared lazy to you," she replied, knowingly; "that was only his artfulness. But it's no use going over these old stories now. The lad has run away, you say. Well and good: let him stop where he is, that's my advice."

"But where is he, nursesey?" persisted Annie.

"How should I know?" she asked innocently. "I know less about him than you

do, for I did not hear until now that he had left Abernant.”

“I am sure you can find out,” said the girl, coaxingly, for she had unbounded faith in this old woman, who often succeeded in making most mysterious discoveries; “will you try, for my sake?” she pleaded.

“It will do you no good, child,” said the old woman, with a softer voice; “if he comes home he will only be a disgrace to you. Better let him stay where he is.”

“No, no; I must have him back again,” she said, eagerly; “only promise to find out where he is. Will you, nurse?”

“I will try,” replied the old woman, cautiously. “Have you anything more to say to me, for I am tired, and want to go to bed.”

Annie knew perfectly well that she was about to attend one of the secret conferences of her sect, and she therefore hurried the other narrative which she had to lay before her. She told her of Mr. Danvers’s proposal, of his love for her, and of his kind-

ness to her brother. She also told her of his wish to hurry the marriage, and concluded by asking Sian's advice.

“Do you love him, child?” asked the old woman, earnestly, at the same time taking Annie's hands within her own, and gazing so steadfastly into her eyes as to cause her to blush; “that is the only thing I will ask you. Do you love him, and does he deserve to be loved?”

“Oh, yes! he deserves to be loved far better than I can ever love him!” she burst forth; “he is so clever—so good and earnest, that everybody likes him! and I—I like him just a little, nurse, but not nearly so much as he ought to be loved! I am afraid to marry him—indeed I am—and I came here to ask you what I ought to do!”

“Give him up if you don't love him,” said Sian, in a matter-of-fact tone, which startled Annie a little, for she had never contemplated the possibility before of giving him up. Give him up! Now that the idea was fully put before her, she felt she could

never do it—if she lost his love she would be poor indeed !

“ I can’t give him up, nurse,” she said, after musing a little. “ I should have no one to love me then ! ”

“ Marry him, then, as soon as you can,” replied Sian, rather contemptuously. “ You needn’t have come to me about it, for you could have decided yourself.”

“ Well, don’t be cross ! ” said Annie, rising to go ; “ you have done me a great deal of good, especially as you have promised to find out where Edward is.”

“ Only promised to *try* and find out,” interrupted Sian.

“ Oh ! it is exactly the same thing with you,” replied Annie, confidently ; “ if he is anywhere in Wales you are sure to find out. If you do, you shall come down to Llawr y Glyn, and select the finest ham we have in the place. There, now ! ”

Llawr y Glyn was the name of Annie’s home, although, for convenience sake, it was generally called the Glyn, especially by

the few English residents. This promised bribe had a perceptible influence upon the old woman, for she promised to do her best, and then accompanied her visitor to the door.

“Good-night, nursesey,” cried Annie, as she tripped away.

“Good-night,” was the reply; and the next moment the bolt was shot into its socket, and Sian had ostensibly retired to rest.

CHAPTER III.

MR. EMMERSON REFLECTS.

HENRY EMMERSON hastened away with his ill-gotten gold as rapidly as possible, and before daybreak he had reached a small village some eleven miles from Glynarth, in the direction of the county town. In order to reach this place he had to pass once more the scene of the tragedy, and this he was at first reluctant to do. He did not, however, deem it advisable to seek safety in Abernant, where he was well known, and from whence he could be easily tracked, and he determined upon travelling along the same route as that which his victim had taken.

“ When he arrived at the first village on the road, he succeeded in obtaining a con-

veyance to the town whither he wished to go. The sun was, however, high in the heavens before he trod the streets of the quaint dull town. He entered the only hotel in the place, and, after enjoying an excellent breakfast, he made arrangements for another conveyance to the nearest railway station, for not even the county town could boast of a railroad. Life was as stagnant and sluggish there as in Glynarth, with this difference, that in the latter place there was some beautiful scenery to make up for the deadness of the social atmosphere.

When he had completed these arrangements, he retired to a bedroom and slept soundly for some hours. The long vigil he had undergone, and the intense excitement of the tragedy in which he had acted the principal part, had well nigh exhausted him, and no pangs of conscience drove sleep away from his eyelids.

The evening was far advanced when he awoke, and after partaking of some more refreshment he was driven away. He

wondered now that physical weakness had so blinded him to his own safety as to remain so long in a town which his victim had visited, and where there might be some anxious concerning his fate, who might institute inquiries about him. He had foolishly exposed himself to needless danger, and the cold perspiration of fear and dread stood in great beads upon his brow, when he reflected that it was quite possible an officer might be waiting at the railway station to arrest him. The risk was certainly great, but still he would run it; for if he would be allowed to leave unmolested, his subsequent flight would be an easy matter.

There were a few people lounging about the platform, but none of them appeared to be policemen. They were nearly all fat, comfortable-looking farmers, and they merely indulged in a long stare as Emerson entered the ticket-office and took a through ticket to Birmingham. The train came up in a few minutes, and he took his seat in a second-class carriage with a sigh of satis-

faction that he had so far eluded pursuit, if any had been set on foot.

He travelled all night; but, although he tried to sleep, his mind was much too active to allow him to do so. He indulged in fruitless speculation as to what had become of the youth who he thought was so securely in his toils. In the first overwhelming sense of horror, his only desire would be to put as wide a distance as possible between himself and the scene of the murder. He had probably fled away for some miles, and had probably lost his way, for he was not acquainted with the hills. His next object would be to get to some town where he might obtain food and shelter, and here he would no doubt give information to the authorities. Why should he not? Emmer-son thought of that anonymous letter sent by Mrs. Montessor's command, and he feared that the youth would suspect that he had been wilfully deceived, and drawn into a serious conspiracy for the purpose of still further implicating him. He must have also

heard Emerson's savage threats, and would be at a loss to account for such sudden ferocity in one who had pretended to be his friend. Putting all the various circumstances together he would, Emerson feared, arrive at the conclusion that he was the victim of a conspiracy, and, aggravated by this, he would give information to the authorities. What possible inducement could prevent him? Emerson saw none whatever. The night was spent in troubled thought and in occasional snatches of sleep, from which, however, he would awake with a great start of alarm.

He reached London in due time without staying at all in Birmingham. The taking of a ticket to this town was a mere blind to cover his real destination. He alighted from the train, and walked quickly away. No one recognised him—no one spoke to him—and he was apparently not anxious to hold communication with anybody, for his pace was rapid and his air abstracted. He made his way to a low, disreputable

street on the Surrey side of the river; and, knocking at one of the doors, was admitted readily by a young woman with a baby in her arms.

“Is that you, Henry?” she asked, as she opened the door.

“Yes; who else do you think it is?” he asked, gruffly, as he pushed her aside, and made his way into the house.

“Well, you needn’t be so savage,” she replied, in a persuasive voice, for she stood in considerable awe of this man, who was in reality her husband.

“Savage? who wouldn’t be savage?” he asked, in a bullying voice. “I can’t go down into the country for a few weeks but that you must be everlastingly bothering me with vile, badly-written letters, which everybody who sees makes fun of. Do you imagine I am going to stand that?”

“I only wanted to know what you were doing, Henry,” she pleaded, standing before him with the child in her arms.

“And what the devil do you want to know what I am doing?” he asked, brutally. “I don’t intend that you should know anything at all about me or my movements—only just as much as I think proper to tell you. If you are not satisfied with that, I shall be only too happy to let you go anywhere you like, and I will make you a present of everything in this house besides, if I were sure I should never be bothered with you again.”

She laid the child down upon the floor, and began to sob bitterly. She was an uneducated, ignorant, but not bad-looking young woman, whom, in some mad fit of infatuation, he had married, and whom he had led a dog’s life ever since. She was his wife, and his movements were therefore hampered; it was this which maddened him whenever he saw her. This house, however, in which he had placed her, had been useful to him upon many occasions when he was in danger of arrest, and he was unwilling, therefore, to give it up.

“Let us have none of that blubbering,” he shouted; “take yourself and the brat out of my sight. But remember this, whenever I go away again, if I am away for a year, I won’t have you writing after me, or in any way interfering with me. If I catch you up to any tricks of the kind, I’ll sell up every stick in this house, and go away for ever. You’ll only have yourself to shift for afterwards.”

He had never spoken so brutally to her before, and the poor woman dreaded lest he might use other means besides hard words: she withdrew accordingly, and took the baby with her, leaving him to his reflections, which were not of a pleasant nature.

He had stipulated for Mrs. Montessor’s hand as the price of his complicity, although he had no actual intention of claiming it when he made the proposal. It occurred to him very forcibly, however, that if she were thoroughly convinced that he was in earnest in making this condition she would

be willing to buy him off with a very large sum of money, rather than accept him as her husband. He was quite aware that no great amount of love was lost between them; and it would be strange, indeed, if it were otherwise. Accomplices in a foul murder are not very likely people to love one another. •

If he were not bound hand and foot to this woman he would have compelled Mrs. Montessor to perform her promise. Sitting before the fire that evening, smoking a pipe and drinking a jug of beer, he thought how delightful it would be to become lord of that broad estate—master of Montessor House, and all appertaining to it. He glanced round the miserable apartment in which he was seated, and it struck him as a strange thing that the occupant of such a place should be able to aspire at all to so elevated a position. If only this woman, who was then sobbing herself to sleep on a wretched heap of straw and rags, were dead, and if Edward did not betray him,

how easy it would be, he thought, to secure the golden prize! If only she were dead,—and why should he hesitate in removing her, as he had removed Edmund Montessor?

He brooded for a long time over this murderous thought, but he gave the idea up at last. It was not that he cared in the least for the unfortunate woman—in fact he would have been very glad to be rid of her, for she was unpleasantly curious about his movements whenever he was absent from home; but he did not wish to stain his soul still deeper with blood, and expose himself to still greater risk of detection. As it was, he feared that it would require all his vigilance and skill to keep himself free from the fangs of the myrmidons of the law; and to commit this second crime was to expose himself wantonly to unnecessary danger.

In the morning he sent out for a bundle of newspapers, and eagerly searched for some tidings of the murder. He fully expected to see a sensational account of a “Mysterious Tragedy on the Welsh Mountains;” but he

searched in vain. There was nothing whatever respecting the murder, and Emerson breathed more freely as he began to hope that, after all, the youth had not betrayed him. His new-born hope deserted him, however, when he remembered that this was but the third day since the event, and that news did not travel quickly from so remote a spot as Glynarth and its vicinity. It would be reported no doubt, in the first place, in the local papers, and would then be copied into the London newspapers. A week might, therefore, elapse before he could be certain whether the murder had been discovered or not.

The week passed away, however, and another after it, and still there was no indication of danger. He did little all day besides sitting in sullen, moody silence, drinking beer, smoking, and meditating on the mysterious events in which he had taken part. The sudden and total disappearance of the body caused him greater uneasiness now than it had done at first. That the young man was really dead he had not the slightest

doubt, for Mrs. Montessor and himself had been satisfied on that point; and this being the case, it was certain that some third person had removed the corpse. This person, whoever it was, must have been near at hand when the murder was committed, and his evidence would therefore be damaging. It was also probable enough that more than one person was concerned in removing the body, for one man, however strong he might be, could scarcely have conveyed it away so suddenly and so completely, unless aided by somebody.

Then, again, these persons, if indeed there were more than one, must have been actuated by some very powerful motive before they would act in so peculiar a manner. Supposing them to be merely casual observers who had arrived by accident on the spot, was it at all probable that they would have secretly spirited the body away? Would they not rather have waited for the return of the murderer, or at all events have instituted a search for him? Why should they

envelop their proceedings with so impenetrable a mask of mystery? The more he tried to solve the very difficult problem, the more perplexed and bewildered he became. There was nobody who could feel an interest in the young man except Mrs. Montessor, and who else but persons impelled by very strong motives would have acted as these unknown strangers had done? He was greatly alarmed by this occurrence, far more so than by the tangible danger which hung over him, for this was an affair which he could not fathom, and which might be fraught with peril to him, peril which he could not avert, for he knew not from what quarter to expect it.

Several weeks went by, and still there was nothing to cause fresh alarm, and he even ventured out into the City as often as he wished. He hoped that Edward had left the country, and that the body of his victim had been disposed of in some way; he could not exactly tell how, but he hoped that he would never hear of it again. His old swaggering air of assurance and impudent confi-

dence returned, and he became extremely indignant at the neglect with which he was treated by Mrs. Montessor. She had not only failed to send the sum agreed upon, but had not thought it necessary to write, in order to explain the delay. Mrs. Montessor, in fact, hoped that he had left the country, and that he dreaded to return, lest he should be arrested, and she determined to encourage this delusion as much as possible, if he wrote to her. She was doomed, however, to be speedily undeceived.

Emmerson's wife kept out of her lord's way as much as possible, and he increased her wholesome fear of him by occasional outbursts of wrath. By these and similar means she was reduced to a thorough state of obedience and subordination, and then a new idea entered Mr. Emmerson's fertile mind. This notable scheme was nothing more nor less than to marry Mrs. Montessor, and to keep his first marriage a secret. It was a difficult and daring scheme, and at first he doubted his own ability to execute it. The prize,

however, was too rich to be despised by a needy vagabond, who had hitherto subsisted entirely by his wits; and after much cogitation he determined upon putting the project into operation.

His first step was to write to Mrs. Montessor.

“I am greatly surprised that you have not thought it necessary to fulfil your promise respecting the four thousand eight hundred pounds agreed upon,” he wrote. “It is probably owing to the fact that the young man Hughes has disappeared without betraying us, and that you therefore expected me to return speedily to claim your hand, as originally agreed upon, in lieu of the rather large amount of money which I named, as compensation for the honour and pleasure of being your husband. I think, however, that, as we are so soon to be husband and wife, it would have been but an act of common kindness in you to write to the address I gave you, for my forcible

separation from you very greatly depressed my spirits.

“That however may pass, but it was absolutely necessary for me to write to you now, because I am about to return to Glynarth at once for the purpose of leading you to the hymeneal altar. Your natural modesty and shyness may perhaps create a wish to postpone the interesting ceremony for a time ; but, like all expectant bridegrooms, I am extremely impatient, and do not wish you to incur the very unpleasant consequences which would be entailed by your refusal to proceed with the matter at once.

“I shall leave London for Glynarth on Monday next, and shall fly to you upon the wings of love. My paternal and affectionate regards to the lovely and accomplished Maria ; and hoping that you are in the enjoyment of your usual calm serenity of mind, I am, with the most sincere regard,

“Yours,

“HENRY EMMERSON.”

If he could have seen Mrs. Montessor's face as she perused this epistle ! Her hope that he was lurking in some far-off land was suddenly shattered to the dust, and she stood face to face with a future from which her soul recoiled with horror. None but very romantic and foolish young ladies would dream of marrying their grooms ; but who on the face of the earth would marry a man because he had murdered another at her request ? Even to her the idea of spending her life in the society of a murderer was loathsome beyond measure ; but she saw no means of escape. She knew him sufficiently well to feel convinced that if she played him false he would adopt some terrible means of revenge. Not, perhaps, the surrender of himself to justice, for he loved his own neck too well to place it in unnecessary danger, but he would devise some more certain plan of vengeance even than this. She was in a sore dilemma, and she saw no way of extricating herself from it.

CHAPTER IV.

A LOVERS' CONVERSATION.

MR. DANVERS came frequently to Montessor House, and his approaching marriage was often discussed there. Maria referred to it nearly every time he called; and he was pleased to find that she took an interest in his engagement. Maria had become very religious and charitable of late. The poorest villagers were astonished beyond measure when she presented blankets and coals to them for the winter; and she had proposed to Mr. Campbell to hold a bazaar for the purpose of clearing away a debt which remained on the village school-room. That gentleman, however, nipped the proposal in the bud by observing that

nobody in the village, except the four or five people belonging to the middle class, would know what a bazaar meant; and there was absolutely no one who would patronise it to any extent. Maria was therefore forced to direct her energy into some other channel.

Mr. Danvers was rather puzzled at first by this display of charitable zeal. From what he had learnt of Miss Montessor and her mother, they were not much troubled with the milk of human kindness; and he could not understand her anxiety—so frequently expressed to him—to do good! He came, however, at length to the conclusion that all the reports he heard were idle fabrications, and that the young lady was, in reality, very kind and benevolent. Maria had succeeded, therefore, in advancing a little way in his esteem.

She was deeply conscious, also, of her own and her mother's inferiority in point of knowledge, when conversing with so polished a man of the world. Her mother, indeed, could scarcely write a long letter without

making several mistakes in her orthography ; and having after her marriage crammed up a great amount of superficial knowledge about history, geography, and literature, which were strangely jumbled up together and mingled, she was apt to make serious and foolish blunders whenever she attempted polite conversation, as in her first interview with Mr. Danvers. Maria, herself, had received the usual boarding-school education, but so far as real accomplishments went she was extremely defective, and she had the good sense to be conscious of it. She was accustomed at times to draw him on^{to} to speak upon various subjects upon which she wished for information, and by listening attentively to what he had to say, and saying as little as possible herself, she contrived to find out his peculiar opinions upon a great many subjects. She wished to find out one day whether he was at all disposed to be religious, and whether he regarded her charitable exertions favourably.

"I have noticed that you do not attend church very regularly, Mr. Danvers," she remarked.

"I was not aware that Mrs. Montessor and yourself went to Glynarth Church very regularly, so as to be able to judge," he said, with a smile.

"We used to attend a church some miles from here, because the family has always worshipped there, and the family vault is there," she replied; "latterly, however, we attend at Glynarth every Sunday evening. We have not missed once for some time."

"You are becoming a model of piety," he said, with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"Do you think it wrong, then, to be very regular in our attendance at church?" she asked, "or is it very foolish?"

"Neither the one nor the other," he replied. "I am always there myself on Sunday mornings now, although I do not agree with the teaching of the Church upon many points. I would go in the evening in prefer-

ence to the morning, but that I have generally been accustomed in England and abroad to spend Sunday evening in the open air when it is fine—by the fire when it is not—reading some interesting book.”

“Your views are rather peculiar, I believe, Mr. Danvers,” she said. “I should think that Mr. Darby’s doctrine would suit you better than Mr. Campbell’s. He is so philosophical and learned.”

“That may be ; but I fear that Mr. Darby and myself would not agree upon very many points both of religion and philosophy,” he replied ; “besides, it is quite impossible to separate abstract truth or error from the men who propagate and advocate it ; at all events I cannot ; and I would much prefer Mr. Campbell to Mr. Darby for this reason.”

Maria was a little mystified, but she did not betray her own ignorance by asking questions as to his meaning.

“When you are married you will settle down into an orthodox churchman, Mr. Danvers,” she remarked with a slight smile ;

“Miss Hughes is an enthusiastic church-woman.”

“So I believe, and I admire her the more because of it,” he replied gravely. “She will teach me, I hope, to become a better man even at the risk of becoming an orthodox churchman.”

Maria was on thorns as she heard her rival—for so she persisted in regarding Annie—thus spoken of. What would she not have given to be thus in his good graces? Still she was progressing slowly, but surely, in her effort to gain his confidence, and she waited patiently for the crowning stroke which her mother had promised to give, although what that lady intended to do was by no means clear to Maria, who knew nothing of the recent events, although she suspected that some underhand work was going on.

What would have been her feelings if she could have overheard a conversation that took place in her mother's private apartment on the following Tuesday afternoon? Mr.

Henry Emmerson, in a new suit of dark-blue cloth, sat on a couch, whilst Mrs. Montessor occupied a seat at the table. The gentleman had just arrived, and was not in the mildest of humours. He had not tasted refreshments for many hours, and his slight irritation might have been owing to that fact. We are apt to be uncharitable and misanthropic before dinner!

“I received your letter before I left London,” he began; “it was only what I expected, although you must have been a perfect idiot to suppose that you could delude me with lies about an imaginary hue and cry, and similar stories. I knew that there was nothing of the sort going on, and that the mur——that this business, in fact, had never been suspected by any one; so I came down, and I find things just as I expected. Why did you attempt to deceive me, I should like to know?”

“For two reasons,” she replied calmly; “in the first place, I thought it fool-hardy on your part to come down here so soon

after the event; and, in the next place, I was, and still am, strongly of opinion that you ought not to extort the fulfilment of my promise at present. It is too soon; and I am not yet quite sure that I am safe."

He changed colour slightly. Could she have had an inkling of what had occurred? Her next question seemed to indicate that she knew something about it.

"Where did you bury it?" she asked; "I was up there yesterday and the day before, and I could see nothing like a grave anywhere."

"You surely did not imagine that I was going to bury him in a conspicuous spot, with a mound of earth and a tombstone above him, that everybody might know a murdered man lay there? I took care to plant him deep enough in the middle of a field, and to remove all traces of what I had done. He is safe enough, you may depend."

She had no misgivings on the point, only an indistinct fear that something would yet occur to injure her interests—*what* she could not say.

“Still it is too soon,” she repeated; “too soon to take an irrevocable step like this, and, to be plain with you, I would much prefer to pay you the five thousand we agreed upon rather than adhere to the original arrangement. I do not think we are at all suited to one another, and I fear your life, as well as my own, would be very miserable.”

He knew better, for he was not a man to fret upon sentimental grievances. At all events, he was quite prepared to risk it.

“I do not agree with you,” he replied, with a calm smile. “I think we are admirably adapted for one another, and that we shall get on charmingly. I should not consider five thousand to be reasonable compensation.”

“How much will satisfy you, then?” she demanded sharply; “name your own price, man, for I would pay a good round sum before I married you.”

“You are charmingly frank and outspoken,” he retorted sarcastically; “I can-

not name a price, however, because I cannot estimate your value in money. No amount of gold could make up for your loss," he added, laying his hand upon his heart.

"This is all nonsense, Henry," responded the lady, impatiently—she had been accustomed in former years to call him by his Christian name, and the habit still clung to her—"you must be perfectly aware that there is not a particle of affection on either side, and our married life would be nothing but a state of enforced servitude and bondage, both to you and me. Now, I am willing to pay you a heavy price to induce you to forego an absurd compact, and rich as you will be then, it will be an easy matter to pick up some young and beautiful lady, who will be in every way more suited to you than an old woman like myself. I am putting the case before you in a common-sense light, and I am sure you will agree with me that this marriage would be an act of utter folly."

"It would be nothing of the kind," he

replied, with something of the same energy with which she had spoken; "it would be the accomplishment of my early hopes and wishes, and it would bind us indissolubly together—in itself no small advantage. If one falls, the other will fall also; and as the secret respecting Edmund Montessor's fate is really confined to ourselves, there will be no danger of betrayal. Separate, we should be always miserable—you would be fearing that I would betray you, and *vice versâ*. This marriage is the very best way of providing for the safety of both of us."

"You are quite determined to carry it out?" she asked, and her voice shook a little.

"Quite," he replied, emphatically; "nothing whatever can induce me to give you up. It must take place at once, too."

"You must grant me three months' respite," she said.

"I shall never be able to wait so long," he replied, coldly; "one month will be as much as my impatience will permit me to allow."

“I will withdraw altogether from the arrangement, be the consequences what they may, unless you give me three months to prepare,” she said, desperately; “you must show yourself to the villagers, and it must be duly announced that we are to be married. Nothing shall be done in a hurry, or else people will get suspicious; everything must be done cautiously, and in a respectable manner. I will have no appearance of haste about it. Three months, or not at all.”

“Very well; three months will do,” he replied, indifferently, although he had been so anxious about it a little time before; “if it is delayed any further, however, there will be a storm—remember that! If you break your agreement again, I shall not keep it.”

If she had but known how very little he could have revealed—that the body had disappeared—and that the sharpest detective could not have discovered traces of the murder! She thought, however, that she

was completely in his power, and was not likely to break her compact a second time.

“You may rely upon me,” she replied, coldly; “if you are determined to make us both miserable, I suppose I must give way. You had better be introduced to Maria, perhaps,” and as she spoke, she touched the bell.

Mrs. Montessor requested the servant who answered it to fetch her young mistress; and Maria appeared, feeling rather anxious as to her mother’s object in sending for her.

“I wish to introduce you to Mr. Emerson, my dear,” said her mother; “a very old and valued friend of mine, with whom you must be better acquainted.”

The young lady bowed rather stiffly. She wondered why her mother should admit so dissipated-looking an individual to her society at all—much less to intimate friendship. Mr. Emmerson acknowledged the introduction in the most affable manner.

“I am highly delighted to see you, my

dear Miss Montessor," he said, with a bland smile; "I have frequently had the privilege of carrying you in my arms in your days of infancy, and I have often promised to myself the pleasure of seeing you again. I am intensely delighted."

The delight was confined entirely to him, however, for Maria made only a few commonplace remarks, lest she should be considered rude, and, after a lingering conversation had been kept up for some time, Maria began to wish that he would take his departure. Mr. Emmerson showed no disposition, however, to leave his present comfortable quarters.

"May I ask where you reside?" she asked, suddenly, hoping to induce him to move. Her mother interposed before he could frame a reply.

"Mr. Emmerson resides in London," she said, calmly; "I forgot to tell you that he has come upon a visit to us."

Maria was greatly astonished, for her mother's visitors were but few in number,

and this gentleman's name had never been mentioned in her hearing before. She was not quite certain, also, as to whether it was proper for them to receive a gentleman visitor for any length of time; but this last objection did not count for much, as everybody ignored etiquette, and acted as they pleased at Glynarth. The young lady was not, however, in a very amiable temper, for she had imbibed a sudden dislike for their guest, and was by no means pleased that her mother had invited him. Her indignation broke out when Mr. Emmerson had withdrawn to dress for dinner.

"What, in the name of goodness, did you invite that man here for?" she cried, turning round upon her mother.

"For the reason I gave you," replied Mrs. Montessor, quietly; "because he is a very old friend of mine."

"He is by no means a good specimen of your friends, then!" remarked Maria, contemptuously; "he looks a thorough scamp—a fellow who has only been accustomed

to mix with gamesters and tipplers. How long do you expect him to stay?"

"For a very long time," replied Mrs. Montessor, in a low voice; "you must be cautious as to what you say about him, for in three months he will be your stepfather!"

Maria's astonished incredulity and indignation baffles description. "My stepfather!" she exclaimed, tossing her head contemptuously; "you are forgetting yourself a little to-day, mamma. You surely do not mean to marry this man?"

"I am *compelled* to marry him," replied her mother, sadly; "it matters not to you how he has gained this power over me, but he certainly has it. I dare not refuse to marry him."

Maria was haughtily polite to the intruder, as she considered him, during dinner. She indulged in vain speculations as to the nature of his influence over her mother, and guessed at every motive except the right one. She did not imagine that he had anything whatever to do with the

Edmund Montessor of whom her mother had spoken to her some time before. The mystery baffled and puzzled her completely, and finally she gave it up in despair.

Mrs. Montessor had another conversation that evening with her future husband. She had no wish to see him at her table, nor anywhere near her, throughout the period of respite which she had insisted upon. For the coming three months she determined she would enjoy her freedom, and a faint hope lurked within her bosom that some way of escape from her hateful bondage might present itself before the expiration of the appointed time.

“I want to know how you intend to occupy yourself for the next three months,” she said, when they were alone again; “of course you do not mean to remain here. To do so would be highly improper and inexpedient, and I do not suppose that you ever intended it.”

He certainly had intended to remain, for he was keenly alive to the advantages of

good quarters, and was loth to leave them when once he had obtained a footing there. Still he was unwilling to confess that such had been his intention.

“The delay which you have persisted in imposing upon me has deranged all my plans,” he replied rather sullenly. “I hoped the ceremony would have taken place at once; but, as matters stand, I suppose I cannot remain here?”

“No; you certainly cannot remain here,” she replied.

“It seems to me that you are in an immense hurry to get rid of me,” he said. “I have not been here a day, and you tell me that I must go away again immediately.”

“I have told you clearly enough that your presence is not very agreeable to me,” she replied coolly, for she had an opportunity here to tyrannize a little over *him*. “There must be no affectation or pretence between us. I tell you distinctly and emphatically that this marriage is in the last degree distasteful to me; that I am willing to assent

to any terms rather than go on with it; but that if you still adhere to your determination I shall endeavour to see as little of you as possible: and in the short respite I have obtained I will not see you at all. Is that clear to you? ”

She stood upright before him, gazing down upon him with bitter hate and scorn. He shrank before her as if smitten with sudden fear, for he had never realized until that moment how very dangerous this woman might become.

“ If it is not, it is not owing to a want of explicitness on your part,” he replied; “ you are extremely candid to-night, Mrs. Montessor, and a word of timely warning may do you no harm. I have no objection to this wild rant if it goes no further, but you *must* fulfil your promise. Hate me as much as you like—and I fancy you are a good hater—but in spite of that you shall be my wife ! ”

He had yet to find how terrible a hater she was !

“I will fulfil it, do not be alarmed on that score,” she said, with a bitter, mocking laugh; “it would be a pity to disappoint so ardent a bridegroom; only the bridegroom must take himself away for three short months, in order that the nuptial preparations may be duly made. We shall have plenty of time and leisure for billing and cooing afterwards!”

“You are right,” he said, with a grim smile, mentally vowing that this billing and cooing should be of no ordinary character; “we will be remarkably affectionate afterwards. In the meantime I shall go back to London to spend the wearisome interval.”

“Yes; and do not trouble me with letters, for I shall not reply to them,” she said. “I do not wish to hold any communication whatever with you until I am absolutely compelled to do so. When will you start?”

“I can hardly leave to-night,” he replied. “I have had a long walk here this morning, and I cannot catch any train for London at Abernant until eight or nine in the morning

if I did start now. You can give me a bed for one night, surely, and to-morrow I will leave for London. That ought to satisfy you."

She assented to this arrangement ; but the business of the evening was not yet over. He wanted money, and she refused to give him any.

"You may please yourself," he said sullenly, as if weary of arguing with her ; "if you do not advance a hundred pounds I shall remain here ;" and he flung himself upon a couch.

To argue with him was useless, and she gave way. He received the money and went away in triumph. Thus the interesting conversation came to an end.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. MONTRESSOR MAKES ANOTHER MOVE.

THE chief topic of conversation in and around the village of Glynarth was the approaching marriage of Annie and Mr. Danvers. A marriage is always an exciting subject, and in so secluded a place it was doubly so, for in general the good people had but very little to talk about.

On all hands Annie Hughes was declared to be a very fortunate girl. Her good fortune, indeed, had caused her brother's sin to be forgotten, and buried temporarily in oblivion by all except the bride-elect herself. The shadow of sorrow had never left her brow, and, instead of becoming lighter, it grew deeper and darker as time went by,

and no tidings reached her of the missing prodigal. Even Sian's sagacity was at fault, for she could discover nothing concerning his whereabouts. The village gossips ceased to shake their heads in righteous horror as they dilated upon his real and imaginary vices, and in the rapid flow of life's stream he passed completely from the thoughts and conversation of men. How very small a place we occupy in the world, and how easily society gets on without us when we drop from the scene!

Frederick was calmly happy, Mr. Darby intensely miserable, and Annie was somewhere between these states of mind. At one moment she was very happy—in the next very wretched; but she hoped that she would be more at ease and happy after her marriage, secure in her husband's love, than she could possibly be alone as she was in the world. She looked forward, therefore, with a slight degree of anxiety to the coming change in her life.

Women, as a rule, are only married once,

and a little pomp and ceremony may be easily overlooked on so all-important an occasion. To men the ceremony does not possess such engrossing interest, but to women it is the great event of their lives. Unless they can display orange-blossoms, dresses of white satin, costly veils, and splendid jewellery upon this occasion, they will never have so excellent an opportunity again. Annie was a sensible, superior-minded girl; but she could not allow her wedding-day to be a common-place one, if it were only for her bridegroom's sake. To do him honour she would assume her richest attire; and that was simple enough, after all, so simple, that fashionable damsels would be astonished if they saw it, and make an effort to be as charming as possible. Thus it came to pass that the Glyn and its fair mistress were both in a state of great confusion and disorder; but what can one expect when a wedding is to take place in a house?

Mrs. Montessor looked on with fierce

indignation. Fair means had proved ineffectual to prevent the hated union from taking place, and the lady was sorely tempted to use foul means. She had succeeded in a far more desperate undertaking than this, and she would succeed here also. Maria urged her on by her doleful lamentations.

“You cannot put an end to this affair as you promised to do, mamma,” she said about nine days before the one fixed for the wedding. “It is scandalous to think of this artful little hussy carrying off a man in every way her superior; and the worst of it is that he doesn’t seem to be a bit in love; or, if he is, he takes it very coolly. I can’t understand the hold she has upon him.”

Frederick Danvers was not a man who cared to parade his love before the cold unsympathetic gaze of the world. He preferred to shut it up in his own heart, where it lighted up his whole being, and filled his mind with gladness. He did not care to carry it outwardly, to be exposed to the idle gaze of everybody; but Maria was utterly

wrong when she imagined that he was not in love with his future bride. He himself did not know how deeply he loved her!

“It is not necessary that we should understand how she has entrapped him,” replied her mother; “it is enough for us that she has done so. I believe, however, that I can force her to give him up—I mean, at any rate, to try.”

She sat down before her desk and wrote a polite note, in which she requested Miss Hughes to step up to Montessor House on business of immediate importance. This missive was despatched by a male servant, and in an hour afterwards Annie, much puzzled to know what the business could be, presented herself. She was admitted at once into the presence of the mistress of the house, who received her rather coldly.

“I have sent for you, Miss Hughes, upon business of serious importance to yourself and to me,” she began; “I hope that you will be calm, and endeavour to do that which

will conduce most to your good, however unpleasant it may be."

Annie wondered what this introduction meant. She could not conceive how her interests and those of Mrs. Montessor were in any way connected, and she began to think that the lady was labouring under some mistake. She was soon disabused of this idea.

"It is of your brother that I wish to speak first of all," pursued Mrs. Montessor. "You are, of course, aware that he left Abernant in disgrace, but you do not know what became of him afterwards—I do."

"Oh! tell me, madam, where is he?" cried Annie, springing eagerly from her seat; "tell me, and I shall be ever grateful to you."

"I do not think he would care to have his place of residence known, for he is a fugitive from the grip of the law," replied Mrs. Montessor, noticing with intense satisfaction the deadly pallor which overspread the maiden's face as she heard this

falsehood; "he has committed a crime which will send him to the gallows, if he is caught. I know where he is at this moment, and I can lay my hand upon him, and upon the witnesses whose evidence would convict him. How would you like to have your only brother hanged?"

The ferocious gleam of hatred in her eyes made the girl shudder with sudden terror.

"For pity's sake do not speak in so horrible a manner!" she cried; "what has my brother done? for pity's sake tell me that!"

"It would be useless to tell you—I cannot, in fact, tell you," replied Mrs. Montessor; "it must be enough for you to know that his life is in danger, and that it depends upon you whether it is forfeited or not."

"Upon me! how can it depend upon me?" asked the bewildered girl; "I can do nothing to save him if he has forfeited his life."

She dared not deny the terrible accusation. Alas! poor child, she had not suffi-

cient confidence in her brother to be able to boldly protest his innocence.

“You can do a great deal,” replied Mrs. Montessor, in a smoother manner; “the circumstances of the case are simply these: Your brother, driven to desperation by his dismissal, attempted to commit a highway robbery, which ended in mur—— which turned out to be a much more serious affair than he had anticipated,” she said, not wishing to charge him distinctly with murder, but allowing his sister to draw this inference; “he then absconded with the proceeds, and is living upon them now in a place with which I am acquainted. I am willing, however, to spare him if you will oblige me in two points.”

“What are they?” asked Annie, pressing her hands upon her throbbing brow.

“You must give your lover up—resign him completely; that is the first.”

“Never, madam!” cried the girl; “I could never give him up. You are asking more than I could possibly do.”

Now that she was in danger of losing him, she felt how great a void would be left in her heart if he were removed from it. How could she possibly live without his love?

“You have to choose between your lover and your brother’s life,” said Mrs. Montessor, undismayed by this outburst, for she was sure that Annie would yield in the end; “surely there ought to be no hesitation on your part.”

“But why do you wish me to give Mr. Danvers up?” was the very natural question.

“Because I wish it,” was the imperious reply. “I may as well be frank with you, and tell you plainly that I am determined Mr. Danvers shall be my son-in-law, and this most preposterous love affair between him and yourself must come to an end. It has gone too far already, and you must release him from his engagement if you wish to save your brother’s life.”

“I cannot do it; indeed, madam, I can-

not," she cried, piteously; "do not be so cruel—so hard upon me, for indeed I cannot do it."

"Your brother will be arrested, then, in less than three days from this," was the harsh reply; "you ought not to allow sentimental nonsense to stand in the way of saving your brother. How can you be happy when you reflect that you purchased a husband at the expense of your brother's blood?"

"I never could—I shall never know a happy hour again as it is," she said, wringing her hands helplessly; "but it is very cruel, madam, to place me in such a position. I have only him in the whole world, and you are so rich and powerful. Do not take away my one treasure from me!"

"This is a complete waste of time, Miss Hughes," said Mrs. Montessor, coldly; "you must try to approach this subject in a cool, business-like manner. As yet I have only told you the first stipulation I intend to make. There is another that may appear

harsher still to you. Not only must you give Mr. Danvers up, but you must marry Mr. Darby instead ! ”

Annie almost swooned as she listened to these dreadful words.

“ Frederick will never give me up,” she said, as a fresh hope sprang up in her mind ; “ he loves me too well to give me up ; far too well ever to marry your daughter. If I married Mr. Darby, it would in nowise assist you in gaining him for Miss Montessor.”

She was arguing the case in hope that the lady might be convinced of the folly of her scheme. She might as well have endeavoured to convince a deaf and dumb person by speaking to her.

“ That is my affair, not yours,” replied Mrs. Montessor ; “ he may not marry my daughter, but I am resolved he shall never marry you, or, if he does, his bride will be a condemned felon’s sister. Marry Mr. Darby, or else your brother’s fate is sealed. He need expect no mercy from me, for I have sworn that this marriage shall never take

place, and, if it does, I will have my revenge—a deep, terrible, and ample revenge!”

The baleful gleam in her eyes was deeper and more intense, and Annie was helpless in her hands.

“Mr. Darby will surely never accept an unwilling bride,” she said piteously; “the marriage vows would be mockery, a hateful farce, and, as a minister of religion, he will never countenance it.”

In her heart she knew that he was a man so filled with selfishness that he would scruple but little to sacrifice her happiness to his whim.

“Mr. Darby is quite ready to forget your brother’s indiscretion, and to receive you as his wife,” said Mrs. Montessor, calmly; “not every minister would be so kind and accommodating.”

“Not every minister would act so infamously,” cried Annie, indignantly—as indignantly as her crushed spirit would allow her; “there is neither love nor religion in him or you!”

“You are not far wrong, so far as I am concerned, my dear,” replied Mrs. Montessor coolly; “I leave clever men, like Mr. Danvers, to discuss religion and to practise love. It is different with Mr. Darby, however. He is doatingly fond of you, and would make an admirable husband.”

“It is quite impossible that I should marry him,” moaned Annie, with a fresh burst of anguish; “I shall be for ever miserable. He does not even believe in the Saviour of the world!”

“This nonsense must come to an end, Miss Hughes,” cried Mrs. Montessor haughtily; “I did not send for you here to decide upon the merits and demerits of the two candidates for your favour. I merely wish to put the choice before you. Mr. Darby and the release of your brother, or Mr. Danvers and that brother’s execution as a pest to society. Choose!” Annie was silent, but her white terror-struck face indicated the strife within. “Not only will I not press this charge, but I will furnish your

brother with means to go abroad, where he may do well," continued the temptress. "A minister's wife, too, is a position in life that scores of young ladies in your place in society would gladly jump at. There is nothing very terrible in your future life; and, on the whole, I have not the least doubt that you will be far happier with the minister than you ever could be with Mr. Danvers. You will be able to rule him as you please, my dear, and that is a great point. Mr. Danvers is too clever and too strong-minded to be governed by a wife, however dearly he might love her. I assure you, you will thank me in time to come for preventing one marriage and arranging the other."

Annie thought it highly improbable. "I love him," she wailed, "I can never be happy without him, and I hate, I detest the other."

"Then you refuse to save your brother," said Mrs. Montessor, wishing to bring matters to an issue; "there is another view of the case, however, which I had almost forgotten

to place before you. Mr. Danvers is too proud to marry the sister of an executed felon. No man's pride could stand that—certainly not his.”

Annie felt the force of this remark. He had been able to overlook her brother's previous errors, but he could never endure the shame to hear his wife spoken of in connection with a man who had suffered a shameful death. His love, mighty as it was, she was sure could never bear that.

She must give him up! She looked into the recesses of her own breaking heart, and felt that she could never hope to hold him fast beneath ignominy so dreadful as that threatened, and looking up into Mrs. Montessor's hard, unmoved countenance, she saw no traces of yielding, no traces of mercy. She must give him up!

“Your decision?” demanded the inflexible woman before her.

“I will do as you wish,” she murmured, in a low, heart-broken voice.

“You must write to him then in my

presence, and from my dictation," said the lady, with a triumphal smile; "you must tell him that you renounce him of your own free will, and that you will never again speak to him. You must tell him that you are about to be married to Mr. Darby, and that you never really loved him—you must——"

"I cannot tell all these falsehoods," moaned the agonized girl. "I have promised to give him up, and I mean to fulfil it. Is not that enough? Do not torture me any further."

"Your promise is worthless without this letter," was the firm reply; "he will not be put off unless you tell him clearly and distinctly to come near you no more. If your brother's life is to be saved, you must write this letter."

She drew forth a plain sheet of note-paper, pens, and ink. It was strange that this woman, who had herself experienced, and was then experiencing, the sickening horror of a compulsory marriage with a man she

detested, should be so ready to force this unhappy girl into the arms of a man wholly abhorrent to her. Emmerson's conduct was a just retribution upon her. She almost forced Annie into a chair, and thrust a pen into her trembling hand.

“Write!” she said, fiercely.

The pen dropped from the nerveless fingers, for the victim of her duplicity had swooned. This obstacle did not daunt her. She should write this letter, and after that she cared not whether she lived or died; in fact, she would much prefer that she should die.

She procured some sal volatile and water, and in a few minutes the poor girl was restored to a consciousness of her misery.

“Let me die,” she moaned, in a voice full of anguish, “let me die. I shall trouble none of you then, and I would be out of my misery.”

“You may die if you like,” was the brutal reply, “but you must write this letter first. You ought not to make such a fuss about it—you will be all right to-morrow.”

Ah, no ! Many months would elapse before she would be at peace again. How gladly would she have shut her eyes on her tormentor, never to open them again, if it were possible. But it was not to be. Mrs. Montessor again thrust the pen into her hand, and bade her commence the letter. Annie shrank from her touch as if from that of a leper, but it was useless to contend against her iron will.

“For my brother’s sake,” she murmured ; “my father would pardon me if he knew it was to save Edward’s life. For his sake only.”

She began to write, whilst Mrs. Montessor regarded her with eyes which were never once removed from their victim. She dictated the letter, and Annie wrote it in a dreamy, dazed way, that showed how little she was conscious of what she was doing.

“MY DEAR MR. DANVERS,” it began, “I am at a loss to know how to put into intelligible language the message I wish to con-

vey to you. You have been so good and kind—far more so than I ever deserved—that I find it difficult to tell you a truth which I ought to have revealed long ago—I have never really loved you. I was flattered by the attention you paid me, and I was vain enough to feel pleased because you had selected me above all others as the object of your love. I allowed you to believe that I returned your passion, if I may call it so. It was very wrong on my part to do so, for I never entertained any feelings towards you beyond those of ordinary esteem and respect.

“You will no doubt be very angry with me, and justly so, but it is better that you should know the truth now than discover it when it would be too late. I am not a suitable companion for you; our paths in life are very widely separated. Your wife ought to be one like Miss Montessor, who moves in your own sphere of society, and not a humble rustic girl like myself. Even if I did love you, therefore, our marriage would be highly injudicious; but I do not, and

never could. I must tell you the truth, although by doing so I may forfeit your respect and friendship for ever.

“Our engagement is therefore at an end. It ought never to have been formed, but it is not yet too late partially to remedy the mischief. To meet each other again would not be wise, but, on the contrary, highly injudicious. Do not attempt to see me, nor to seek any further explanation of my conduct. I may add, however, that I have accepted Mr. Darby’s hand; and I believe that I shall be far happier and more useful as a minister’s wife than I could ever hope to be with you. This will show you how useless it is for us to meet again.

“Forgive and forget me,

“ANNIE HUGHES.”

Mrs. Montessor placed an envelope before her, and was compelled to guide her trembling hand as she addressed it. When it was all over, Annie dropped the pen and fainted again.

Mrs. Montessor did not apply restoratives so quickly this time. She took up the letter and read it carefully through, folded it, and placed it in the envelope, and finally locked it up in her desk. Then she turned her attention to the unconscious girl, and endeavoured to restore her, but this time the task was a more difficult one. She revived at length, however, and nothing could exceed Mrs. Montessor's apparent tenderness and anxiety concerning her. She compelled her to drink some wine, and to lie down until she was a little better.

"Mr. Darby will call on you to-morrow, my dear," she said; "I will tell him not to pester you with too much attention, and when you are married, this little weakness will pass away."

When she was married! Annie shuddered violently from head to foot as she thought of that dreadful time.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE TOILS.

MR. DANVERS descended to his breakfast-room on the morning following the events just recorded, and found Annie's letter awaiting him. He recognised the handwriting immediately, and could not imagine what she could have to write about, unless she had received some news of her brother. He seated himself at the table, and opened the missive in a calm, leisurely manner, and then began to read it.

His face underwent a great change almost immediately. The light faded away from the clear, deep eyes, and he became deadly pale,—as pale as Annie had been in writing it. He read it carefully through, and not a

word escaped his notice; and when he had finished its perusal, he commenced again. When he arrived at the end a second time, he laid it down and began to think..

What could be the meaning of this extraordinary epistle? He had a firm belief in Annie's truthfulness and candour, and that she should have led him to believe that she loved him, whilst she was at the same time engaged to another man, whom she professed to regard with the utmost dislike, were facts which he could not reconcile. Had she not told him that she loved him, and that Mr. Darby and his attentions were odious to her? and yet she told him deliberately that all along she had been acting a part and wilfully deceiving him. No man likes to be deliberately hoodwinked, and Frederick Danvers's honourable nature recoiled with indignation from such a systematic and so useless a course of deceit.

"Another of my absurd dreams has been shattered," he muttered, with a grim smile.

"I was just beginning to flatter myself that

I had found a genuine woman at last, and was promising myself days and years of Utopian happiness, and this is the result ! I fancy they are all alike as fickle and unstable as water ; and as for love, I suppose that is a delusion which is fast disappearing in this dull, prosaic age.”

He took up the letter again, and read it over once more. Most men would have tossed it into the fire, and striven to forget all about it, but his feelings were too deeply implicated to allow him to do this.

“ It seems to me there has been some foul play somewhere,” he thought, when he had placed it aside again ; “ why should she throw me on one side and accept this man, who I am sure she does not love, and who has only seventy pounds a year to live upon ? If she were indeed the heartless flirt I took her to be a short time since, she would certainly make sure of the richer suitor ; but she actually chooses the poorer, and the one I am sure she loves the least. There is something wrong. The very tone of the

letter indicates that, for if she were writing alone she would never indulge in sentences like these. Some one has dictated it then, but who?

This was a question beyond his power to solve, and he determined upon putting the question to Annie herself. With this intention he walked down the valley to the Glyn, but the door was opened by one of the old female pensioners, who said that her young mistress was not at home.

This statement was not true, and Frederick was fully aware of it; but he was too proud to insist upon seeing her. If she were determined to shun him and to marry the minister, he would make no objection. The change in her plans was so sudden and startling, however, and her evident reluctance to meet him indicated so great a want of firmness on her part, that he was confirmed in his opinion that some malevolent influence was at work. Some men would have argued that she was so ashamed of her conduct that she dared not meet him,

but he thought differently. She was not one who would deliberately commit an action of which she would be afterwards ashamed, so that he was thoroughly convinced that some powerful influence had been at work in the production of this sudden and startling change.

The news had reached the village at an early hour that morning, for Mrs. Montessor took care to have it made known. Speculation as to the cause was rife among the gossips, but no one had any idea as to Annie's true reason for her apparently inexplicable conduct. It was generally put down to female caprice, but the unanimous opinion of the villagers was that she would bitterly repent her change of lovers, for Mr. Darby was by no means popular amongst them.

That gentleman had been duly informed by his patroness of the success of her plans, and he was profuse in his thanks.

"I hope you will be very happy, Mr. Darby," said Mrs. Montessor; "you will

certainly have a most charming bride; but I must give you a word of friendly advice with regard to your conduct towards her. I need not conceal from you that just at present she is extremely depressed by the loss of her favoured suitor, and I have no doubt will treat you somewhat coldly, if not harshly. Never mind conduct like this. You will be married soon, and then you can do as you please with her. Bear anything rather than lose your temper; you can repay her when you have her secure."

This was exactly the line of conduct which Mr. Emmerson had laid down for himself in his present relations to Mrs. Montessor. Just as she was inciting the minister to nurse his wrath until after marriage, so her future husband was reserving the vials of his indignation until the honeymoon was over.

"I will endeavour to follow your advice, madam," replied Mr. Darby; "it will be difficult, however, to do so sometimes, even to a philosophic temperament like mine, for

the young lady is somewhat haughty and overbearing at times. As you remark, however, it will be easy to remedy these defects in her mental organization when she is Mrs. Darby."

A gleeful smile overspread his countenance as he thought of that good time coming.

"I have not the least doubt that you will make a model couple in every respect," continued Mrs. Montessor; "my only fear is that you will spoil matters before the ceremony takes place. You must not attempt to make any display of affection towards her, but you must accept the fact that she is compelled to marry you against her will. Treat her with ordinary courtesy, but nothing more. I will arrange everything connected with the marriage, and all that you have to do is to wait patiently."

"Must I never go near her?" he asked in a disappointed tone.

"Visit her about once a week, as a matter of form," replied the lady; "unless you do so, the villagers will suspect that she is

being compelled to marry you, and that would never do. You must not remain long, however, and make no attempt at affection with her. If you do, there will be an explosion.”

Mr. Darby appeared very uncomfortable. After all, he was not sure that his position as Miss Hughes's accepted suitor was a very comfortable or enviable one.

“When do you think the marriage will take place?” he asked, nervously.

“As soon as possible,” replied Mrs. Montessor; “in a fortnight or three weeks, if possible. The sooner the better.”

Mr. Darby cordially agreed with her upon this point; and after some further conversation, he took his departure, purposing to call upon his bride-elect in the afternoon.

Annie had risen that morning with an aching heart and head. She was excited and feverish, and well nigh distracted with physical and mental anguish. The storm of passion which had filled her breast upon the previous evening was not yet spent.

All night long she had tossed restlessly upon her pillow and tried to sleep, but the effort was a vain one. She rose in the morning ill and weary, and feeling more keenly than ever the great blow which had fallen upon her. She tried to occupy herself with household affairs, but her trembling fingers would scarcely allow her to grasp the slightest article, and the room seemed to swim around her. She gave up the endeavour at last, and, retiring to her own room, she drew down the blinds, and threw herself on her bed.

If Mr. Darby had been there, even his selfish nature would have pitied the poor girl, as she lay convulsed by strong agony and deep despair. How the world seemed to have darkened around her! Father and mother had been taken from her, and the former was sleeping his last sleep near the little sea-side church. Her brother was lost to her, and had made himself liable to be seized by the relentless hand of the law. Her lover, whose affection had brightened

her existence and filled her heart,—he, too, had been taken from her. What would he think of her when he read the letter she had been compelled to write? Would he not hate and despise her for ever? Surely her cup of misery was bitter enough, but it was sweet when compared with the crowning bitterness of all—her compulsory engagement to Mr. Darby. Her feelings towards him were such that she could never hope for a single day's happiness in his society. She could not tolerate his presence. She despised his affectation of learning and wisdom, and she abhorred his religious principles. And yet she had promised to accept this man as her future husband, and to promise love, honour, and obedience to him at the altar, when she was sure that she could neither love, honour, nor obey him! She would have withdrawn from so unholy a pledge, but that her brother's life was dependent upon it. For his sake she was willing to undergo any amount of misery.

She had given directions to the old

woman who was attending to the domestic duties of the household that no visitors should be admitted, and when Frederick came, the old dame, acting upon her instructions, refused him admission. Annie lay in the darkened room, and listened to his voice below. It thrilled through her frame, and her bosom heaved with anguish as she reflected that she should never more hear his loving, tender words, and had no longer a right to regard him with affection. In a few weeks she would be another's, and this love, which had been the joy and brightness of her existence, must be for ever removed from her heart! He went away, and his receding footsteps fell painfully upon her straining ear. The sense of his nearness, even though she did not see him, and could not speak to him, was comforting; and when he was gone, she gave way to a fresh burst of sorrow. So the weary hours passed away, and the afternoon came. Mr. Darby presented himself at the door, but was refused

admission by the vigilant guardian below. Annie heard his voice, however, and determined to see him. She would have a clear understanding with him at once, and then the sooner it was over the better, she thought. Accordingly, she descended into the sitting-room, and sent the old woman to call him back.

He saw at a glance, as he entered, how greatly she had suffered. Her eyes were red with weeping, and her cheeks were very pale. Her dress, too, was slightly disordered, and her long, silken tresses hung carelessly about her shoulders. He dropped his usual philosophical attitude before grief like this, and seated himself in a chair as far away from her as possible. He was, in fact, extremely nervous and rather alarmed.

“I have sent for you back again, Mr. Darby, to explain to you distinctly the terms upon which we are to meet in future,” she began, in a calmer voice than she would have thought possible a few

minutes before. "I have promised Mrs. Montessor that I will marry you, but this promise, you must remember, was made under the greatest pressure, and extracted by a threat too terrible to be repeated. I must tell you frankly and honestly that I do not love you, and never will do—more than that, I dearly love another."

Her voice trembled a little as she made this confession. Of course he knew to whom she referred, and he secretly gnashed his teeth with rage and vexation. She had not been without a hope that he would be moved by this declaration to renounce his claim; and although Mrs. Montessor would not allow her to accept Mr. Danvers, still the release from her hateful engagement to this man would be an immense relief to her. So generous a course of conduct, however, never occurred to Mr. Darby.

"If you are willing to accept a wife who can never love you, and who is actually forced into a marriage with you, I have nothing to say," she continued, determined

to place the matter fully before him. "I can scarcely imagine, however, that a minister of religion can be a party to anything so unjust."

He was at a loss how to answer this direct attack. As for giving her up merely because she did not love him, the idea was preposterous!

"My dear Miss Hughes," he replied, in a bland, smooth voice, "if you have repented of the arrangement you made with Mrs. Montessor you had better say so at once, and the whole thing is at an end. I do not wish to discuss the matter at all; it is enough for me to know that you have promised to be my wife. Further than that I have nothing to do with it."

She saw that to appeal to this man's generosity was perfectly useless, for he had none. She could not escape from her terrible position, and it was in vain to struggle against the inevitable.

"I hoped that you would not approve of this method of gaining an unloving wife,"

she answered, in a faltering voice. "As you are determined to exact the fulfilment of my promise, I suppose I must submit. This, however, I must insist upon. There must be no pretence of affection, no unnecessary meetings or conversations whatever. You must never forget, and I am not likely to do so, that I am forced into this marriage entirely against my own inclination."

He murmured his assent to the proposed arrangement.

"Very well, then, we understand each other," she said, rising, as a hint that the interview was ended; "do not come here unless you have something of real importance to tell me, for if you do you will not be admitted a second time."

"You are very hard upon me," he said, endeavouring to smile, as he took his hat and stick.

"Hard upon you!" she burst forth, her pent-up indignation finding vent at last; "do you expect me to use honeyed words,

and to flatter you, when you are treating me in this inhuman, cruel, and unchristian-like manner? I am forgetting myself—you do not believe in Christianity; perhaps, if you did, you would not act contrary to its every precept as you are doing now. Am I nearly as hard upon you as you are upon me? You are compelling me to marry you when I hate and detest you, and yet you talk about my being hard upon you.”

She turned away to the window to conceal the rebellious tears which she could not restrain, and he took the opportunity to steal away. This outburst of passion alarmed him greatly. He was becoming more and more convinced that his married life would not be so bright and happy as he had once fondly hoped it would be.

The excitement of this interview passed away, and left her weaker than before. Her only hope of escape had died out completely, and the wan hues of despair were visible upon her countenance. If Mr. Danvers could have seen her then, how

quickly he would have comforted her and chased away her sorrow! But henceforth, she thought, their paths were to be very widely separated.

He, in the meantime, was brooding over the wrong which some secret enemy had inflicted upon him. He did not blame her, for he was sure that nothing but the most absolute necessity could have induced her to give him up; but he laid the blame upon those who had placed her in so cruel a position. He was not, evidently, angry, for he but seldom gave way to fits of passion, but he was more grave and silent than usual, and deeply wrapped in thought.

The rumour of the marriage arranged between Mr. Darby and Annie reached him in the course of the day. Mr. Campbell—kind, sympathizing Mr. Campbell,—came to ask him about it.

“I thought it right to call, Mr. Danvers,” explained the worthy vicar; “I heard the report this morning, but treated it at the time as idle scandal. It is talked of, how-

ever, all over the village, and, from your troubled aspect, I am afraid it is true."

"It is quite true, Mr. Campbell," was the deliberate reply; "Miss Hughes has suddenly broken her engagement with me without assigning any satisfactory reason, and has accepted this Unitarian minister, who may be very well in his way, and who, I have no doubt, is a worthy fellow, but for whom she has hitherto exhibited no affection—quite the reverse."

"It is a most mysterious affair," said the vicar, stroking his chin reflectively.

"I cannot understand it," pursued Mr. Dánvers; "I could never believe her capable of such conduct, unless she had very powerful reasons for doing so. Even now I find it difficult to credit the evidence of my senses, and it cuts me to the very soul to think that I am the laughing-stock of every ignorant boor in the village. There will be a heavy reckoning some day between those who are at the bottom of this plot and myself."

Mrs. Montessor's enemies were increasing in number.

"The general opinion is that it is a mere act of caprice, but I have known her for a long time, and she is not at all a girl who would take an important step like this, guided by nothing but caprice. Besides, she is materially injuring her own interests," observed the vicar.

"My dear sir, you must pardon me for asking you not to mention this matter again just for the present," said Mr. Danvers; "it is of course a very painful one to me, and I can scarcely trust myself to speak about it."

"I will certainly drop the subject altogether if it gives you pain," replied the vicar; "I only mentioned it to express my deep sympathy with you in your present trial. No one can regret it more deeply than I do."

"I feel quite convinced of that, and I am exceedingly grateful to you for your kindness," said Mr. Danvers earnestly;

“as, however, it cannot be remedied, it is useless to discuss it. It is better to forget it.”

Have any of the many thousands who speak of forgetting their troubles ever succeeded in doing so? Frederick Danvers was not a man likely to forget the great passion of his life, however earnestly he might strive to do so.

When he was alone again, thoughts of Annie and of her love to him—a love which he never for a moment doubted, notwithstanding her declaration in her letter—came crowding upon his memory, and made him intensely miserable. He took his hat and went out towards evening, and he bent his steps in the direction of Montessor House, the place, above all others, where his sufferings would be noticed and commented on!

He was received by Maria, for it was a part of her mother's diplomacy to have them together as much as possible. She was, of course, full of the exciting news, “I

was greatly surprised and astonished to hear of the rupture between Miss Hughes and yourself," she said softly; "we were so pleased when we first heard of your engagement, and so sorry to be told that it was broken off!"

Her feelings, and those of her mother, were exactly the reverse of this; but young ladies angling for husbands are not always strict in their adherence to the truth.

"We will not speak of it, if you please," he replied gravely; "it has given me great pain, and I do not like to discuss it."

"I am so sorry that you are unhappy," she said softly, and, in his then state of mind, her sympathy was very welcome to him. "I wish I could remove the cause of it."

"You are very kind, Miss Montessor," he answered uneasily; "the best thing to be done now is to bury the whole business out of sight."

They discoursed about indifferent subjects, although it evidently cost him an effort to

do so. Her manner was very gentle, almost tender, and her sympathy, if not expressed in words, was perceptible enough to him. Still, he saw not the snare which was laid for him : he saw only a pretty, agreeable girl, who sympathized with him in his troubles, and took an interest in him. He was very grateful to her, and his visit did him good ; but if anybody had told him that in another fortnight she would be his affianced bride, he would not have credited it.

CHAPTER VII.

MARIA PROPOSES TO MR. DANVERS.

A FEW days passed away without the occurrence of any event of importance. Mr. Darby did not venture to the Glyn again, and Mrs. Montessor left Annie in peace for a little time, that she might recover her strength. The master of the lodge was as unhappy and moody as he had been on the first day when the news of his great disappointment reached him. Time did not lessen his grief, but seemed only to deepen the shadow which had fallen upon his life.

He spent his days in wandering through the grounds of his house, and in lying upon the grass in the warm sunshine, for he could not brave the gaze of the villagers as yet.

He could not meet the eyes of men, knowing that every passer-by either pitied or laughed at him, and that the wound in his heart was visible to them all. His grief was the subject of public conversation, and this was gall and wormwood to his haughty spirit. The sting lay not in the notoriety, however. It was the loss of the fair girl whom he had loved so fondly and trusted so fully—the agonizing knowledge that in a few weeks she would be the bride of another, and that other a man quite unworthy of her—and the chilling sense of isolation and loneliness which had so suddenly fallen upon him.

He took a strange resolution one day—a resolution which showed how completely his love had overmastered his pride. He would call upon Mr. Darby himself, and would endeavour to gain a clue to the mystery which bewildered him so completely. If he had stayed to reflect upon this step he would never have taken it; but he did not. It was no sooner thought of than he carried it into execution.

Mr. Darby lodged with a widow, the relict of a captain who was drowned in the Mediterranean whilst on his way from New York to Marseilles. The parlour and bedroom which he occupied were very fairly furnished, and were much superior to the ordinary accommodation of the village. The house itself was a large one, containing ten rooms, and the walls were covered with ivy. From Mr. Darby's window a fine view of the vicarage and the church could be obtained; and as the house was situated a little without the village, the place was quiet and secluded, and not unworthy to be the chosen retreat of a philosopher.

Mr. Darby's habits were somewhat peculiar. He had an objection to early rising, and never made his appearance upon weekdays before eleven or twelve, and on Sundays he was frequently late at the morning service. His room was always in a state of indescribable confusion, which baffled all the widow's efforts to restore order; for it frequently happened that when she had taken

unusual pains to restore the place to order, he would come in and upset all her arrangements. He was naturally fond of an untidy room filled with litter, and his inborn propensity had been greatly increased by an unlucky remark he once overheard, that great men are proverbially careless and untidy. If order was heaven's first law, it certainly was not Mr. Darby's; and yet, strange to say, he was always scrupulously neat in his dress—so much so, in fact, that the sober-minded Welsh deacons who were the pillars of his church unanimously regarded him as a dandy.

He was surrounded by a mass of manuscript sermons, old newspapers, and letters, when Mr. Danvers called. It was nearly twelve o'clock, but he had only just risen, and, if he had confessed the truth, had not breakfasted.

He received Mr. Danvers with forced cordiality; but he was evidently much embarrassed. That gentleman took a calm survey of the room as he accepted the chair which was offered to him, and his reflection

was that the minister would be glad to establish himself free of rent at the Glyn, instead of remaining in his present quarters.

“I am afraid you are busy, Mr. Darby,” he said, with cool politeness. “I have disturbed you in your work.”

“Oh, not at all ; don’t mention it,” was the hasty reply, as he pushed away a mass of old newspapers; then, relapsing into his usual philosophical attitude, he remarked,—

“It is surprising, sir, that, considering the many thousands of years men have existed upon this globe, human affairs in every conceivable department should be in a state of such complete confusion, so to speak. There is no branch of human affairs which can be said to be in a state of order, and it really appears as if every new comer deliberately neglects the experience of his predecessors, and sets out according to his own whims. Now, there can be no doubt that experience is the best teacher, but her fees are tremendously high, and it would be much more satisfactory if

the results of the experience of others were assumed by those who follow, just as a proposition of Euclid, once proved, is afterwards taken for granted.”

“No doubt we should get on much better,” remarked Mr. Danvers, as the minister paused to take breath. “I did not call upon you, however, to discuss abstract questions this morning, but to speak upon a subject of much importance both to you and to myself.”

He paused, and Mr. Darby, perceiving what was coming, changed colour and became confused.

“I will not waste your time nor mine in beating about the bush in this affair,” continued Mr. Danvers. “It is well known throughout the village that you are Miss Annie Hughes’s accepted suitor, and she has told me as much herself in a letter which she sent me. Now, I want to know—and I am determined to know—what is the nature of the compulsion you have contrived to bring to bear upon her?”

Mr. Darby was very uncomfortable. He had been brought up among rustic, ignorant people, and had never mixed much with educated men, and he was, therefore, awkward and agitated.

“Did she tell you she was in any way coerced?” he asked.

“I came here to ask questions, not to answer them, Mr. Darby,” replied Mr. Danvers, quietly. “You must forgive me for my apparent harshness, but in a case like this I cannot hesitate in the course I ought to pursue. I say she has been coerced; how I obtained this knowledge or drew the inference does not concern you. I simply ask what is the nature of this coercion?”

“And suppose I do not choose to tell you?” rejoined the minister, whose self-possession was returning. He was decidedly better off than his opponent, he thought, and he had no reason to be alarmed, even if Annie had, in a measure, taken him into her confidence, as he believed she had.

“Then you admit that you are aware of this coercion?” exclaimed Mr. Danvers, whose suspicions were amply confirmed. “I was not quite certain of the fact when I came in, but I am perfectly convinced now that there has been foul play somewhere. You may refuse to tell me, but I shall find out; you may depend upon that.”

Mr. Darby was, of course, in complete ignorance as to the threat or threats which Mrs. Montessor had made use of, but he did not wish to appear so. The temptation to indulge in a small triumph over a man who was so greatly his superior was too good to be lost. He had, besides, no dread of confessing that coercion had been employed; on the contrary, he almost gloried in it, for he had great faith in his patroness's resources, and the same threats which had been so efficacious before would prove equally powerful again. He had, therefore, no fear of losing Annie.

“You may do whatever you think proper in this business,” he replied, in a somewhat

insolent tone. "Miss Hughes will be my wife in a very short time, and nothing that you can do will prevent it."

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Danvers, calmly. "You have not succeeded yet in your infamous project, and I shall have something to say before you do. It surprises me that a person of your profession should be a partner to a scheme like this. It certainly ought to be brought before the attention of your church members."

This was a home-thrust; for the reverend gentleman's seventy pounds a year would be in serious jeopardy if the case were brought before his congregation, for he was entirely at their mercy. He was sorry that he had virtually admitted the compulsion.

"You may make any charges against me which you may think proper," he said, still preserving his insolent tone. "Sensible men will ascribe it to disappointed love and to a little natural vexation. In any case, it will not prevent the marriage from taking place."

“Then you are determined to persevere in this vile conduct?” said Frederick, rising, for he saw that it would be useless to prolong the conversation.

“Whether it be vile or not is a matter of opinion,” was the cool reply. “I shall persevere, however, as you say.”

“Very good; I thought I would appeal to your better feelings in the first instance, but, since this has failed, I must try other means.”

He went away before Mr. Darby could make any reply, and his vague threat caused that gentleman considerable uneasiness.

He remained at home throughout the afternoon, trying to form some plan of operation which would enable him to reach the bottom of the painful mystery surrounding him. He could think of nothing, however, and not a glimpse of light shone upon his mind. He was completely puzzled.

He went up to Montessor House after dinner, and was shown into the drawing-room, where mother and daughter were

seated. Mrs. Montessor, after the customary greetings, contrived to make her escape, leaving the young people, as she called them, alone.

They sat in silence for some time. He was moody and dispirited, and she had something upon her mind which prevented her from conversing as freely as usual. Occasionally she would glance furtively at him, as he sat wrapt in thought, but she said nothing.

“I am afraid I am remarkably stupid this evening, Miss Montessor,” he said at last. “I came up because I felt very dull, and hoped you could do something to enliven me.”

“I should be only too glad if I could,” she answered, in a low voice. “You seem very unhappy, Mr. Danvers, and all your friends grieve because of it; none do so more than myself.”

Most men would have noticed the rather demonstrative tenderness perceptible in her voice, but he did not. He knew nothing

of the scheme she had woven, and walked headlong into the snare.

“You are very kind, Miss Montessoro—very,” he replied, moodily. “Unfortunately, kind wishes cannot remove one’s unhappiness, or else there would not be much in the world. I never felt more miserable and lonely in my whole life.”

He had forbidden her to speak upon the subject of his disappointment, and yet he himself was leading up to it. He was unable, in fact, to think of anything else, and yet he could not bear to have it plainly spoken of.

“We have all our troubles to bear,” she answered, softly. “You are not the only one who feels miserable and lonely, and you can go away at any time to mingle with society, and shake off your sorrow. Your grief may be alleviated, but there are others whose sorrow nothing can remove.”

“Not many, I think,” he said. “There are not many who have built a bright castle, and dreamed beautiful dreams, which were

shattered so rudely as mine have been. The blow was all the heavier, also, because I did not expect it, and if I had been told a short while ago that it would have happened I should never have believed it."

It was gall and wormwood to her proud spirit to listen to such words. Loving another so fondly, how could she hope to win him? and yet she would make the effort!

"You must shake it out from your heart, Mr. Danvers," she said; "it was not to be, and you may rejoice yet that it was so suddenly broken off. You will look back upon this as a very small trial indeed."

"Never!" he exclaimed. "I may, in a measure, forget it, but I shall never think of it without regretting what has occurred. It is so hard to see everybody around you happy, and you yourself utterly miserable. I find it so, at any rate!"

"Everybody is not happy," she replied, in a low voice. "Very few are. If you could only see the hearts of those around you, you would change your opinion."

“Surely you are not unhappy, Miss Montessor?” he said, struck by her manner. “Your life ought to be very peaceful and contented.”

“You are mistaken,” she replied, laying down her work, and looking steadily at him; “if the truth were known, perhaps I have more troubles than you have.” She was leading him on to the desired point, but rather awkwardly, for he made no remark which in any way helped her.

“What is it that troubles you, Miss Montessor?” he asked, gently, almost forgetting his own cares as he spoke.

“I dare not tell you,” she replied, bending her head low over her work, to conceal the blush which would not come, “it is not a subject which I ought to mention at all—especially to you, above all others.”

“And why not to me?” he asked, gently. “No one could sympathise more fully with you, or be more willing to help you.”

She was silent, uncertain how to proceed.

No better opportunity might ever recur for the accomplishment of her purpose, and she determined to risk it, whatever might be the result.

“I will tell you, then,” she said, in a low and apparently agitated voice. “Suppose, for a moment, that you were in my place, and that you were deeply and passionately in love with a gentleman who was unaware of this feeling. Suppose, also, that the gentleman was about to leave, and in all probability would never return. What would you do under such circumstances?”

It did not occur to him, even then, that she referred to him. The possibility of such a thing never entered his mind.

“It is a difficult question,” he replied, thoughtfully. “Does the gentleman care for you at all?”

“No,” was the emphatic reply; “he even loves another, but still, that cannot change my intense love for him. He is not engaged; outwardly, at least, he is free; and I see him about to leave the

neighbourhood for ever, whilst I dare not say a word to prevent him from going."

He had a faint suspicion that she referred to him, but the supposition appeared too incredible. Whoever it might be, however, he was very sorry for her, and would have done anything in his power to lighten her burden. The pangs of disappointed love were too fresh in his own mind not to make him sympathise with others in the same predicament.

"May I ask who the gentleman is?" he said, in a low, gentle voice, as if anticipating the answer that was to come.

She was silent for a few minutes, unable to frame a reply. It was difficult to tell him to his face that she loved him and wished to marry him, and yet this was the task she had to perform.

"You will be deeply offended with me, I know; perhaps you will never speak to me again," she said, in a tenderly pleading voice that would have found its way to a sterner heart than his. "I shall deserve it,

but still I must tell you. I cannot bear to think that you will go away and never return, simply because one girl never understood and appreciated you."

She had not told him yet, but he was sure now that he was the man, and he stood rooted to the spot with surprise and perplexity as to what he ought to say.

"You have been speaking of me?" he asked, at length.

"Yes," was the brief reply, and then both were silent again. He was communing with his own heart, and trying to decide upon the course he ought to pursue. She was dreading his resentment and anger, and wondering whether her scheme would prove effectual.

He crossed the room, at length, and stood beside her chair. She had covered her face with her hands, and her head was bent, but he laid his hand upon her shoulder, and spoke slowly and gently. If she had looked into his face she would have seen how very pale and ill he appeared,

but she thought of nothing at that moment but of the success or failure of her plan.

“I am glad you told me of this,” he said; “if you had not I should never have suspected it. I am very sorry, but it cannot be helped now. Miss Montessor, if you can accept a man who does not love you as you ought to be loved,—nay, who even loves another, but who will nevertheless do his best to make you comfortable and happy,—I shall be highly honoured.”

His manner was rather cold and hard as he uttered the concluding words, and she perceived it.

“You are very noble and generous,” she replied; “you have forgotten yourself in thinking of me, and I cannot allow you thus to sacrifice yourself. Leave me, and forget that this conversation ever took place.”

“I cannot do that,” he answered gravely; “I do not even regret that it has taken place. If I cannot be happy myself, I can, perhaps, make you happy and contented, and for the present that is enough for me.”

It was amply enough for her also. She had gained her object, and henceforth she was secure of the prize, for she knew him well enough to be certain that he would not withdraw from a compact like this.

She held out her hand, and he took it and kissed it. Thus was the engagement sealed and ratified, and then he took his leave almost immediately. He wished to be alone to consider upon what he had said and done, and to realize, if possible, the new position he had assumed. There was no manifestation of tenderness, no embrace, no parting kiss, only a shaking of hands as if they were ordinary acquaintances, and not people who had just pledged themselves to pass the whole of their future years in each other's society.

He returned homeward in a thoughtful mood. He did not regret the step he had taken, for, in his opinion, Maria Montessor was a most estimable young lady, superior to most of her class, and well qualified to be any man's wife, whatever his station might

be ; but there was the one great objection always remaining—he did not love her. He almost shuddered as he thought of the long dismal years he would have to spend in the world, haunted by the remembrance of that sweet, bright face, which was lost to him for ever, but which, whether waking or sleeping, would be always present to him, and that whilst another stood by his side and called him husband. Standing beneath the stars on that memorable evening, he wondered why he had ever come to this remote Welsh village, where he had experienced nothing but sorrow and trouble—sorrow and trouble which seemed destined to last the whole of his life !

Would that he had never seen Annie's sweet face—never breathed to her a word of love—never built those bright castles in the air which had so suddenly collapsed ! And now he had no right to think of her again, and it was his duty to banish her completely from his mind, for was he not engaged to another by his own deliberate

act? A gloomy prospect spread itself before his mind's eye that night, and he saw no chance of extricating himself. He knew only that he was very miserable, and that his misery was to last a lifetime.

And where was Maria whilst her future husband was meditating thus? She was in her mother's room, relating to that lady the scene which had just occurred—relating it with eyes flashing with triumph and gratification.

“He is mine now,” she said exultingly; “he will never break his plighted word. Are you not very glad?”

Mrs. Montessor did not appear so overjoyed as her daughter, although she was really very glad. Her own troubles were thickening around her, and upon that night she felt depressed and irritable.

“Of course I am glad,” she answered, rather crossly; “I only hope he will keep his word. Between all these schemes I am in a continual worry.”

Retiring to rest that evening, she told

herself that her toils were well-nigh over ; that Edmund Montessor was dead ; Annie Hughes to be married to the Unitarian minister, and Maria to Mr. Danvers. She was certainly scoring heavily, but she dreaded lest something might happen which would mar all her plans, and compel her, Sisyphus-like, to roll the stone up the weary hill again. Even in the hour of triumph she knew no peace, for the shadow still darkened her soul, and haunted her day and night. She longed for peace ; if she had dared she would have prayed for it, but it never came !

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. MONTRESSOR MEETS A NEW DIFFICULTY.

MEANWHILE, Mr. Emmerson was engaging himself after his own fashion. The dread of being arrested some fine morning on a charge of murder had completely disappeared, and as for the missing body and Edward's flight, he had long since ceased to puzzle his brains about them. He was well supplied with money, and there is no place so pleasant as London to the man who has money and is disposed to enjoy himself.

Beer and skittles were the chief amusements of Mr. Emmerson's life, combined, of course, with tobacco and an occasional game of cards. He dabbled a little, also, in turf matters, and managed to burn his fingers

pretty well in his book-making. Then he retired in disgust and gave up horse-racing, returning to his old resorts and boon companions.

Even beer and skittles, however, are expensive in certain cases, and in a couple of months Mr. Emmerson's funds began to diminish rapidly. There was yet another month before the stipulated time, and he had to provide his wedding outfit, which he would certainly be unable to do if he went on spending money so rapidly as he was doing.

Just at that juncture a report reached him respecting Maria's proposed marriage with Mr. Danvers, and a new idea entered his mind.

"The old girl means to sell me, I'll bet," he muttered, as he exhaled clouds of smoke from between his lips; "she means to marry the girl to this fellow, and then she will be in a way independent, for she could live on the daughter and her husband. She'll offer me a good round sum to be off with our

bargain, and if I refuse she'll defy me. I don't at all like this marriage scheme."

There was really no ground whatever for alarm, but when the notion had once entered his head it was difficult, if not impossible, to get it out. He determined to hasten down to Glynarth and hurry things on at all costs; and this resolution, once formed, was speedily carried out.

He gave her notice of his coming, and told her how thoroughly he distrusted her, and how he was determined either to compel her to marry him, or to disclose the secret which he held. She read the letter with blanched features and quivering lips, feeling that her hour had indeed come.

A rumour was speedily prevalent throughout the village that Mrs. Montessor was to be married to a gentleman from London. Mr. Darby heard it and wondered. Mr. Danvers heard it and disbelieved it, and the villagers in general rubbed their hands as they speculated upon the probability of a "triple event." Frederick's new engage-

ment was known, and added to Mr. Campbell's perplexity. He could not understand why Annie should have thrown away a good offer for a bad one, and he could not comprehend how Mr. Danvers had so suddenly changed his mind, unless, indeed, it was angry disappointment which actuated him, and yet he was not a man likely to give way to angry disappointment, at least to such an extent as to marry a woman he did not love under its influence.

"I declare the parish is getting into a hopeless state of confusion," he mused one afternoon; "here are three couples to be married, and two of them at least are not love marriages—neither are they marriages for the purpose of acquiring wealth on either side. It would be hard to tell why these people are getting married at all; and for my part I am sure I don't understand it. But things will come right in the end," he thought. "I do not think forced marriages, as I believe these to be, will take place, and if they do, it will be all for the best."

At that moment, however, there was every probability that they would take place. Mr. Emmerson was coming down in a few days, and Mrs. Montessor saw no hope of escaping from the toils. She would have given a great deal to be free, but she was helpless and compelled to acknowledge this man's influence over her.

She met him in the garden on his arrival. He was elaborately dressed in a new suit of black, and the greatest care had been taken that his appearance should be as faultless as possible. The general effect, however, was not pleasing. The black dress did not harmonize well with his dissipated, bloated appearance, and, in fact, served only to bring it more prominently into notice.

"I have come, fair lady, on the wings of love to pay my devoirs at thy feet," he said gallantly, as he approached her. "I have come to drink happiness from thy smiles, and to spend my life in thy service."

"I am afraid it is not the only thing you will spend," she replied, grimly; "you

must be aware that you are an unwelcome guest, forcing yourself upon me before the appointed time, and I do not care to hear you ranting. Let me advise you to go back the same way as you came."

She knew that it was perfectly useless to attempt to change his resolution, but there was no harm, she thought, in trying. She could be no worse off than she was at this moment.

"You might as well talk to the rocks," he said, coolly; "you might as well scream at—at that figure in the road that night,"—and he chuckled as he observed her intense alarm, "as endeavour to change my resolution. I can't trust you, madam, although I regret to have to say so before your face, and in order to put things on a more satisfactory footing the wedding ceremony must take place at once."

"Stay until the three months are up—you have only three weeks more," she said.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," he replied, determinedly; "it is Tuesday to-

day. I will allow you a week's grace, but next Tuesday you will be either my wife or in a prison, and I with you."

They were seated in a rudely constructed summer-house, which was situated in a lonely part of the grounds. There was no witness of the conference, and when the lady and her guest entered the house none of the servants guessed how Mrs. Montessor's proud spirit rebelled against the bondage in which this man held her enchained; this man whom, nevertheless, she treated so well, and who, it was quickly rumoured, was to be the new master. There was a small dinner party that evening, at which the vicar and Mr. Danvers were introduced to Mr. Emmerson. The vicar's opinion of him was a most unfavourable one, and great was his wonder that anything should have induced Mrs. Montessor to accept such a person. Mr. Danvers was also unfavourably impressed, and Maria had sufficient tact to turn this circumstance to account. She followed him

to the hall-door as he was taking his leave, and laying her hand affectionately upon his arm, she asked abruptly:

“What do you think of my stepfather that is to be?”

He saw that she too was not well pleased by her mother's selection, and he was very sorry for her. She would have to live near this man, and to associate a great deal with him, unless he took her away, and the bare thought made him hesitate.

“I would rather not express an opinion after so short an acquaintance,” he answered, gravely, after a pause; “your mother knows him better than we do, and she has chosen him to be her husband.”

That was an unanswerable argument!

“Mamma has done so, it is true,” she replied. “I am sure, however, I shall never like him. I fancy he must be very rich, and that, perhaps, is the reason mamma accepted him. I am afraid I shall hate him, though he owned the whole county.”

She had certainly made a strong point

by suggesting that the stranger might be rich, although she knew that he was quite penniless. The supposition would, at all events, help to explain her mother's conduct.

Mr. Campbell called at the lodge on the following morning, and was shown into the breakfast room, where Mr. Danvers was discussing his morning meal. He had breakfasted long before, but he refused to allow another cup to be sent for.

"I am an early riser," he said, smilingly, "and I always breakfast before eight. I generally manage to get through most of my work before my one o'clock dinner, and then I have the rest of the day for myself."

"It is a very good plan, I have no doubt," replied Mr. Danvers; "unfortunately, I never could rise very early, although I have often tried. I like to work at night and rest in the morning."

Both tried to get up a conversation on indifferent topics, but the attempt was a failure, for both were full of the approach-

ing marriage, and at length the vicar referred to it.

“It is to take place next Tuesday,” he said, in answer to a question from Mr. Danvers. “I cannot at all understand why she should have accepted him, nor why the ceremony should take place so suddenly. The whole affair puzzles me very much; in fact, since your arrival here, things have taken a most complicated and mysterious turn.”

“I do not see anything very incomprehensible in Mrs. Montessor’s conduct,” returned Mr. Danvers. “I have no doubt this gentleman is rich, and that she has known him for a long time. The affair may have been arranged long ago, and kept secret until the last moment, in order to avoid the gossip and talk which it would naturally occasion. I think she has acted very wisely!”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Mr. Campbell, thoughtfully. “I do not suppose she would marry him if he were poor, and he

may prove to be a very much better man than we anticipate now. We will hope so at least.’’

He would have spoken of Annie, but that he feared to offend his friend. He had heard how she shut herself up at home, and never went abroad among the villagers as she had been wont to do before; how she was pining and grieving over some hidden sorrow, and never allowed even Mr. Darby to come near her. The good vicar knew all this, and was convinced that she was the victim of some foul conspiracy, but he hesitated to introduce the subject again. No doubt Mr. Danvers knew all about it, he thought, for it was not likely he would lose sight of one in whom he had once taken so deep an interest.

And Mr. Danvers did know all this and more. He knew that she had been urged by Mr. Darby, if not by some one else, also, to name the wedding day, but that hitherto she had refused to do so. It was to come off very soon now, however, and

hitherto he had failed to discover a clue to the mystery which surrounded her, and he felt himself powerless to change the current of events.

At the House the greatest preparations were being made to celebrate properly the auspicious event. The servants as well as the villagers were greatly surprised at the announcement of the approaching marriage, but when the first burst of astonishment and conjecture was over, everybody set to work in good earnest. There was no time to indulge in vain speculations as to the reasons which had induced Mrs. Montessor to accept another husband, and the village disquisitions on this point were postponed until after the wedding was over.

Mr. Emmerson was the object of much attention. He rode out a good deal during that week of waiting, and even had the hardihood to visit the scene of the midnight assassination. Everywhere he was treated with the greatest deference and respect, and he began to feel how pleasant

it would be to rule over a small kingdom like this, and be regarded with reverence by the whole country side. It was considerably better than a hand-to-mouth existence in tenth-rate lodgings in London or elsewhere, even though he had to commit bigamy in order to gain possession of the much coveted position. He had been accustomed, from his youth, to live in any way that he could, and ease, wealth, and luxury were new and highly delightful things to him.

The days wore away too slowly for him—too rapidly by far for Mrs. Montessor. There had been no further communication between them, since the day of his arrival, beyond ordinary courtesies, and she appeared to be avoiding him as much as possible. Her daughter watched the progress of events with deep interest and anxiety. She hated this man who had forced himself upon them, and who seemed so calmly confident and secure. She knew that he had some hold upon her mother, and she

was convinced that it must be something more than ordinary to induce her to dream of marrying him. Maria even guessed at the truth, for she remembered her mother's remarks respecting Edmund Montessor, and she had often wondered why the topic was never again mentioned. The danger seemed to have disappeared as suddenly as it came, and Maria often shuddered as she thought of the probable way in which he had been removed. She knew her mother's unscrupulous nature too well to think she would hesitate for a moment in doing anything, however desperate, to save her estate, but she wondered why she did not make use of some means or other to get rid of this man. She was full of anxiety, not unmixed with alarm, as to what might be the ultimate result of these plottings and schemings, and she regarded the approaching Tuesday with as much, if not more, dread than Mrs. Montessor did herself.

That lady would, in fact, have contrived to dispose of Emmerson, but that she hesi-

tated to take upon her soul the guilt of a new crime. The tragedy which she had instigated, and in which she had almost taken a part, had never ceased to fill her with the most bitter remorse. Perhaps, if she had the opportunity of undoing her work, or of again having the option of committing a dreadful crime, or of losing the estate, she would have chosen the former, but nevertheless her remorse was real and bitter. It was not repentance and contrition ; it was only the recollection of that young dead face, lying so still in the roadway, that was ever present to her mind ; the consciousness that, not far away, was a body mouldering to dust which would have been full of life if she had not decreed his death ! Often, in the solemn hours of the night, she could imagine that she heard the report of the pistol, and she would jump up in horror, whilst cold perspiration overspread her. She told herself she was not well, that these were merely morbid fancies, which would pass away, but they grew upon

her, driving peace and happiness away from her, and changing every joy in life into bitterness and misery! She could not take upon herself a new crime more awful than the first, for in this case she herself would have to strike the blow, and actually to commit the deed. Much as she hated this man she could not do it.

She scarcely knew herself how much she hated him, nor how deep was her dislike of him. Up to the moment of receiving the last final letter she had hoped to shake herself free from him, to bribe him with half her estate, if necessary; to do anything rather than marry him; and she was in strong hopes that she would succeed in shaking him off. This forced and hasty marriage was a new difficulty and a most unpleasant one, which she had not before contemplated as at all probable, but which now stared her in the face. The more she thought of the approaching unholy covenant the more she hated him, and if she had dared she would have killed him a hundred

times over rather than stand by his side at the altar! But she was chained hand and foot, and had no alternative left, for she knew the desperate man she had to deal with, and fully believed that, if she broke the compact, he would find means to accuse her publicly of the crime to which she was accessory. And he would have done so.

Sunday came, and went; but at Montessor House there was no holy calm—no Sabbath peace rested upon its inmates. The domestics were too full of the coming festivities to pay much heed to the sanctity of the day, and the mother and daughter were oppressed and downcast. Mr. Emerson had gone on a visit to Abernant, and would not return until Tuesday morning; and then, Mrs. Montessor reflected, with a shudder, he would never leave again.

They went to church in the morning, and saw Mr. Danvers, who accompanied them home to lunch.

“This is the last time, I presume, that

we shall be gathered together thus," he said, gravely, when the servants had left the room.

"Yes," the last time," replied Mrs. Montessor, with a sigh she could not repress ; "things cannot go on in the same groove for ever, Mr. Danvers ; and now that Maria is to have a home of her own, I thought I should be lonely by myself."

It was the first time that she had referred to her reasons for forming this new alliance, and the first time, also, in which she had openly mentioned the subject of Maria's marriage.

"Miss Montessor and myself must follow your good example soon," he answered, in the same grave manner in which he generally spoke.

"She is at liberty to fix upon any time she pleases."

Maria would have named the next day, but that it was impossible to do so, but she inwardly registered a vow that it should be an early date.

“We will discuss the matter again,” she said, softly. “It is hardly proper to talk about it to-day.”

Her assumption of piety was never more acceptable to him, for he disliked the whole subject. He was in honour bound to marry this girl, and, if it ought to be done at all, it was as well that it should be done quickly in order to dispose of it. Still, when the matter had to be looked fully in the face, he shrank from the marriage, at least until he saw Annie Hughes actually married to the minister. After that, it mattered nothing what became of him.

The next day was an extremely busy one. The villagers were busy decorating the church and preparing bonfires; other festivities were organized and set on foot; and if people were not very glad because of the marriage, they at all events intended to be very merry; and very often mirth is a substitute for joy on such occasions, when it is impossible to combine them.

Mother and daughter were alone together

in the dressing-room of the former late on Monday night. Mrs. Montessor appeared jaded and ill, and Maria was doubtful whether she would be able to go through her part of the ceremony next day.

“You are not at all well to-night, mamma, and you will be worse to-morrow,” she said. “I wish this fellow had never intruded himself upon us. Is there no possible way of shaking him off? Surely you must be able to get rid of him somehow?”

Mrs. Montessor knew of but one way, and that she dared not adopt.

“There is none,” she answered, with a slight shiver, although the room was very warm. “He has me in his power more deeply than I care to tell you, and he insists upon this marriage.”

“But who is he?” persisted Maria, who really knew as little about him as the vicar and Mr. Danvers did. “He doesn’t seem to have mixed much with respectable society, and he never once mentioned his house. Has he a house of his own?”

“I believe so—in London,” replied her mother. “He is not the sort of person a sentimental young lady like you would choose for a husband, perhaps; but necessity knows no law, and when we are fairly married I have no doubt we shall get on capitally together.”

She tried to speak cheerfully, but it was easy to detect the suppressed pain and excitement which raged in her breast.

Retribution was beginning to overtake Mrs. Montessor!

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

THE wedding morn came at last, and the sun shone upon the village with more than its wonted splendour. From an early hour the village boys and girls, attired in their best Sunday suits, were running about the roads and inspecting the bonfires with the greatest impatience for the commencement of the festivities. Floors were scrubbed and scoured, and doorsteps freshly chalked, and everybody endeavoured to appear as prim and neat as possible. A tea-party was to be given at the National School in the afternoon in honour of the occasion ; and if one had strolled into that abode of learning between seven and eight o'clock,

the village lads and lasses, and some of the matrons also, would have been seen laying the tables, and cutting up great heaps of buns and currant bread (*bara brith*, as one or two youngsters about the door called it), whilst some youths were hastily constructing some floral decorations for the walls.

This was the state of things in the village ; but busy as all were there, it was nothing compared to the bustle and excitement which prevailed at Montessor House. Servants were rushing to and fro in wild haste, and everybody gave contrary orders to every one else in a most bewildering fashion. Mrs. Montessor was very pale and nervous. Her maid was dressing her, and the girl wondered that a bride even of so forbidding a bridegroom should appear so downcast. The truth was that the lady's dread and horror of this marriage were never so strong and vivid as upon this morning, and never had she felt more helpless in the hands of Emmerson. She hated him, and yet she could do nothing without

him, and was not safe for a moment if he chose to desert her interests.

No wedding guests were expected beyond the vicar and Mr. Danvers, who was to act as groomsman, with Maria as bridesmaid. They were to meet at the church at eleven o'clock, and Mr. Campbell alone was to officiate. The bridegroom arrived soon after nine, and was received by the small boys of the place with the most unbounded enthusiasm. His conveyance was not a very respectable one, having been hired in a small inn on the way, and the horses were miserable, attenuated animals, which seemed scarcely able to keep themselves upright on their weak and trembling legs. Shabbiness was the prevailing characteristic in everything belonging to Mr. Emmerson.

He went up to Montessor House, and was shown into a room where his bride awaited him alone.

"You are punctual," she said, sneeringly. "I see you are determined to carry out our ridiculous compact."

“Quite determined,” was the reply; “If anything had induced me to waver, your opposition would have encouraged me to insist upon its fulfilment.”

“We are a model couple,” she remarked, with a faint smile. “This is a most edifying conversation for our wedding morning. What will it be in the future?”

“We must leave the future to take care of itself,” he answered, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. “I daresay we shall be happier than most people who begin with violent love and generally end with violent hate. We are beginning in just the reverse way.”

“True,” she said, “violent hate first. You may not be far wrong.”

“I am not wrong at all,” he said, with a cool laugh, which made her blood boil; “I know well that you hate me with all your heart, but that does not trouble me in the least. In fact, if I had to choose between a wife who loved me very much and one who hated me excessively, I should prefer

the latter, for life in her society would be very interesting and exciting, whereas one would soon get tired of love and sentiment."

"We are wasting time in this idle nonsense," she said angrily, rising as she spoke. "Let us start for the church, unless you have something more pleasant to talk about."

He started alone and on foot, and entered the vestry through the private door. Here Mr. Campbell was waiting in his surplice, and through the half-closed door he could see that the church was thronged by an expectant crowd.

It was certainly a most unorthodox and strange wedding, but as the good people of Glynarth knew nothing about the mode in which they ought to be conducted, every one was quite satisfied. The bride and her daughter came up to the door in the family carriage, accompanied by Mr. Danvers, who fell in with all the arrangements in the readiest manner, on the principle of doing

at Rome as the Romans do. The door was opened by the footman, and Mr. Emmerson, who was waiting on the steps, handed out Mrs. Montessor, and, followed by Maria and Mr. Danvers, they advanced up the aisle to the altar, whilst the village schoolmaster played Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" on the harmonium. As he happened to be a very inferior musician, the effect was not on the whole successful, but nobody was listening, and he managed, somehow, to get to the end.

Then the ceremony began. A close observer might have noticed a change in the bridegroom's countenance as the clergyman read the address respecting any impediment to the marriage which either of them might know of, but he made his responses boldly and distinctly. The bride, who had quite recovered her hard, cold self-possession, was equally calm and collected, and the ceremony passed off smoothly enough, somewhat to the disappointment of Mr. Campbell, who expected up to the last

moment that something would intervene to prevent the marriage. Bride and bridegroom advanced down the aisle, whilst the school-children strewed flowers in their path, and without the church a great crowd which had assembled set up a shout of joy.

Mr. Emmerson was in the act of handing his wife into the carriage when a face in the crowd caught his eye, and he almost reeled with the shock, for he recognized it in a moment. He stepped into the carriage as unconcernedly as he could, but the lady had noticed his sudden pallor, and glancing quickly at the crowd below, she discovered the cause of his alarm. There, in the middle of the crowd, dressed in a fustian suit, and evidently in disguise, was *Edmund Montressor himself!*

It was impossible, she thought, that it could be him, for had she not seen him dead and cold? but still the resemblance was extraordinary. Every feature was exactly similar to that of the dead man, and she

could not account for it in any other way. The carriage moved off, and she almost fancied she detected a smile of triumph on the stranger's face as he gazed upon her. He was certainly not an inhabitant of Gly-narth, and if it were not Edmund Montressor who was it?

She turned to her husband with trembling lips.

"You saw that man," she said hoarsely ; "was he the man we thought to be dead, or was another man shot in mistake? "

He was determined not to tell her of the disappearance of the body; it could do no good to do so, and it would be a confession that he had deceived her.

"He is very like the man that was shot," he replied. "It may be an accidental resemblance, however, for if this is Edmund Montressor, he would have claimed the estate before this."

This was true enough; but she groaned nevertheless, as she reflected that she had perhaps sacrificed herself in vain, and tied

herself for life to this man without any reward whatever.

The wedding breakfast was rather a melancholy affair, for none of the guests were in good spirits. The bride and bridegroom were anxious and uneasy, and Frederick could not help observing it. Mr. Campbell was confirmed in his suspicion that some mischief lay beneath the surface which would account for this strange bridal. There was to be no honeymoon tour, and in the afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Emmerson visited the village, where the fun was fast and furious. The stranger was nowhere to be seen, and both breathed more freely, and began to hope that they had been troubling themselves needlessly. But the doubt made Mrs. Emmerson miserable!

Two or three days passed away, and one morning the postwoman delivered a letter, addressed to Mrs. Emmerson in a strange handwriting, which she did not recognize as belonging to any of her correspondents. Her husband was away for the day, and she

carried the letter to her own room, and examined the envelope before opening it. It bore the Charing-cross postmark, and was addressed in a bold masculine hand-writing. She had a presentiment that it contained unpleasant tidings, and she sat for some minutes without making any effort to learn its contents.

She mustered up courage, however, to open it, and the first words made her countenance of a deadly hue, and her lips quivered with agony as she read it. It was brief, but exceedingly explicit :—

“MADAM,” it began, “I have no doubt that you have long since come to the conclusion that I was dead and buried, and that the Montessor estate was safe in your hands. You were mistaken. The man that was shot at your instigation was not your humble servant, and I am prepared to prove my claim to the estate whenever I think proper to do so. How I became acquainted with the nefarious plot against my life does

not concern you ; suffice it to say, that you are now not only in danger of losing the estate, but also of being convicted of an attempt upon my life—an attempt which terminated so disastrously for a wholly unconcerned person. You yourself will admit that you have deserved no mercy, for if you had succeeded in your design, I should not now be alive to annoy or molest you. But you have failed, and ought to take the consequences.

“I am disposed, however, to deal leniently with you. I am a wanderer by habit and inclination, and could never settle down in Glynarth. I am, therefore, willing to leave you in undisturbed possession of the estate, and to be silent respecting the lamentable tragedy that night upon the hills, provided I am paid for my silence. You must allow me one-half of the revenue you enjoy from my property, and at once send me a cheque for the first year’s allowance. On no other terms will I leave you in peace, and you ought to consider yourself extremely fortu-

nate that you have so far escaped the just reward of your deep and awful sin.

“Yours,

“EDMUND MONTRESSOR.”

The address was in a street leading out of the Strand, and there was a postscript, demanding an immediate reply.

Her position was truly an awful one. She had married Emmerson for no purpose whatever, and she was completely at this man's mercy! How had he discovered her secret? and if he had succeeded in finding out the murder, was not the same channel of information open to others also? She was in the toils, and her difficulties drove her well-nigh frantic.

Her husband returned in the evening, and she sent for him at once. He was greatly alarmed when he read the letter, and recommended her to give up the estate at once.

“It is no use fighting against destiny,” he said gloomily; “the fellow is tractable enough now; but he will always be making

demands upon you, and, rather than run the risk, it would be better to give it up."

"Give it up? Never!" she exclaimed; "poverty would be highly pleasant in your society, would it not? I am not going to give it up after sinning so deeply to keep it, even though I sinned in vain."

"What will you do then?" he asked, moodily.

"You must see this man," she replied, decisively. "If he appears to be the real man, we must pay him the money, and trust to chance to dispose of him in some way. If we missed once, we might be more successful a second time."

He shuddered slightly, and she saw it.

"You are becoming sentimental and pious," she sneered. "First of all you propose to give up the estate, and then you recoil in horror from a deed you committed coolly enough a short time ago. We are fairly started in crime now, man, and, if we are to save our necks, there must be no hesitation."

“Have it your own way,” he answered, carelessly; “I shall be able to take care of myself, whatever may happen, and perhaps this fellow may be blown up in a steamboat, or break his neck over a precipice, so as to do away with the necessity for putting him out of the way.”

“If anything of the kind happens, you will be thankful, no doubt, for you are becoming very chicken-hearted,” she returned, sarcastically; “you will have to go to London to-morrow and see this man, and, if it be him, I must try and raise the thousand pounds he asks for. You can telegraph down as soon as you have seen him.”

Having made this arrangement, they broke up the conference, and Mr. Emmerson went out for an evening smoke. His wife had other work on her hands.

She sent for Annie Hughes, and the girl came. As she passed through the hall she saw Mr. Emmerson's luggage ready for his journey on the following morning; and Mrs.

Emmerson had taken care that this should catch her eye.

The lady received her coldly, and almost angrily.

“I have long wished to see you,” she began, as soon as her visitor was seated; “I have not had time to attend to your marriage sooner, but now I am determined to have the matter settled. You must marry Mr. Darby in a fortnight’s time, or take the consequences.”

“Spare me, madam!” cried Annie imploringly; “you have robbed me of my lover, and he is engaged to your daughter. He is lost to me for ever, and why should you force me into this odious marriage?”

Mrs. Emerson walked to the window and looked out.

“I really hoped that we were to have no more scenes,” she said, with perfect composure, and without even glancing at the stricken girl’s pale, tearful countenance; “if you are not willing to marry Mr. Darby just say so, and your brother shall be

arrested. That will be the end of the matter."

"No, no ; that must never be!" exclaimed the girl ; "he must be saved at all cost, at any price."

"Well, then, you may as well put away your rhapsodical style for a while, and listen to me," observed Mrs. Emmerson, coldly ; "this marriage has been repeatedly postponed on various pretexts. I will not allow it to go on any longer. In a fortnight you will be Mrs. Darby."

Annie had covered her face with her hands, and was sobbing bitterly.

"I will provide you with your wedding outfit, and pay the expense of a honeymoon tour," she went on, in a burst of generosity. "I shall always be glad to render you any assistance, but you must act with more sense and spirit than you do at present. I see nothing very terrible before you, child ; you are not the first, by a long way, compelled to marry against their will, and you ought to be thankful that your

future husband is nothing worse than a minister.”

Annie suspected that she was thinking of herself, and wondered whether she had been forced into this hastily contracted marriage. If she had, she could scarcely deem it possible that she would force another in the same way after experiencing its horror herself. Annie was too unsophisticated, however, to understand the motives which governed Mrs. Emmerson. A despairing, conscience-stricken woman herself, she hated everybody who was at all happy; and, besides, she had a strong suspicion that Mr. Danvers would never marry Maria until the object of his first love was actually united to another. She was determined, therefore, to push it on as quickly as possible.

“Where is my brother?” demanded Annie, suddenly; “you have not once told me where he is, nor what has become of him; and before I marry this man I must see him.”

The threat seriously alarmed Mrs. Emmerson, but she was outwardly as calm as before.

“If you fancy that I am deceiving you, and that your brother’s danger is imaginary, you had better refuse to marry Mr. Darby altogether, and then I will prove to you that the peril was real,” she said coldly, and in a slow, stern manner that crushed the newly formed hope in Annie’s heart. Her brother must be guilty, she thought, or she would never speak like this.

“You wish to see your brother?” continued the lady; “it is natural enough, and therefore you shall see him—when you are on your honeymoon tour. When you are married I will tell you where to find your brother; and, if you like, you can visit him, although I would advise you not to do so.”

“Why not, madam?” asked Annie, in surprise.

“It would do him no good, and would disgrace your husband,” was the reply; “he is a minister, remember, and his name ought not to be associated with people like your brother.”

Annie did not weep; nay, she did not

even protest against this mode of speaking of her only brother. No doubt the lady had reason for speaking so decisively, and she was too troubled and overwhelmed to struggle any longer.

“ I suppose the matter may be considered as settled then,” observed Mrs. Emmerson ; “ you will marry Mr. Darby in a fortnight, and I will at once order your dresses.”

A low, agonized moan was the only response.

“ Yes or no, girl ? ” demanded the lady, angrily.

“ Yes, for my brother’s sake ! ” she murmured. And next day Glynarth was full of the news.

Marriages were following each other fast and quick, and so long as a plentiful supply of beer for the men, and tea and *bava brith* for the women and children, was provided, the good villagers had no objection. Such a run of luck as this was not very likely to last, and one and all resolved to make the best of it.

CHAPTER X.

MR. DARBY IS SLIGHTLY DISAPPOINTED.

MR. EMMERSON left for town on the following morning, and his wife waited anxiously for tidings respecting the result of his mission. She had not long to wait; for on the afternoon of the second day a telegram, brief, but sufficiently intelligible, reached Mrs. Emmerson.

“There can be no doubt on the subject. Send the parcel as soon as possible.”

The parcel was the thousand pounds Edmund Montessor demanded; and it was clear that Emmerson was satisfied as to the genuineness of the claim. Fortunately Mrs. Emmerson had a large balance at her bankers, for the revenue derived from the

estate was very much larger than the outlay required to support Montessor House. She had therefore no difficulty in sending the sum which Edmund Montessor demanded.

In the meantime, Mr. Emmerson was enjoying himself in London. His business over, he repaired to the bosom of his family, where the original Mrs. Emmerson—so to speak—received him with outstretched arms. She was very curious to know where he had been, and what new scheme he was engaged upon, but he managed to silence her inquiries.

“I shall be away for a very much longer time than this when I go next,” he said, fiercely. “If you try to track me, or interfere in any way with me, you will repent it to the very last moment of your life. So long as I send your allowance regularly you have nothing to complain of.”

“But you are away so often, Henry,” she complained; “you don’t care a bit for me now.”

“Not a bit,” was the reply. “I should be very glad to hear that you were drowned, or had run away, or done anything, so that I might be rid of you. Lay that to heart, will you?”

She did lay it to heart, and it bore fruit when he least expected it. He remained in town for upwards of a week, and then returned to Glynarth, after solemnly enjoining his unfortunate first wife to make no effort to molest him.

Mrs. Emmerson—as we must still call the late Mrs. Montessor—received him in that sanctum where so many secret conferences had taken place. She had been eagerly expecting his return, and his delay roused her utmost impatience.

Maria sometimes thought that her mother was really fond of her new husband, and was unhappy during his absence, but she did not suggest this to her mother. She was glad enough to be rid of her odious stepfather for any period of time, however short.

The first greetings between husband and wife were careless, not to say cold. Neither cared to maintain a show of affection when it was nothing but a pretence.

“You have been long enough before you could make up your mind to come back,” she said, rather maliciously. “Are you tired of your bargain already?”

“By no means,” he replied; “but you can’t expect me to go up to London and come back again the same day, unless I had something particular to do here, and I had nothing. I have arranged this business, however.”

“You saw the man?” she asked, although he had said as much in his telegram.

“Yes, twice,” he replied. “He is, I believe, the identical fellow we saw here on our wedding-day, only, of course, he was more elegantly dressed. He was very reasonable; said we were fools in trying to put him out of the way; but he refused to tell me how he became acquainted with the secret. He promised to go away from

England, and would not return until his next year's revenue was due."

"Did he go?" she demanded eagerly.

"Yes; I saw him go on board the Hamburg steamer, and I watched the boat until she had fairly left the shore," he replied. "I think he is safe for another year, and that we have nothing to fear."

No, she might have nothing to fear, but she had a good deal to be bitterly sorry for. She had married this man, bound herself, as she thought, to him for life, for no purpose whatever, and she had caused a person, wholly unconnected with her or her schemes, to be murdered in mistake. She had dipped her hands into human blood, and not only was she no gainer by it, but her crime was known, and her complicity in it. She had, indeed, a good deal to fear, as well as to regret.

"How did he make out his claim?" she asked. "You must have had something more than his bare word."

"His appearance was in itself sufficient

to satisfy any one as to his identity," he answered. "He had proofs, however, which we could never get over. He furnished me with copies of his baptismal certificate, and other papers. Here they are."

He held out a bundle of papers, which she took, and read in silence. There could be no doubt as to his identity, even if he had nothing but the documents he brought from abroad. But there were other and still more convincing proofs, which he knew he had obtained from Sian—the papers which the old woman had so resolutely refused to give up to her.

"He is undoubtedly my nephew," she said, when she had perused them all; "the only thing I cannot understand is that he should so suddenly have abandoned his expressed purpose of taking possession of the estate, and be willing to grant such liberal terms, when he saw how determined we were to get rid of him. That puzzles me."

"I think he really is a wandering sort of a fellow, and perhaps he prefers this

compromise to the trouble and bother of fighting us. I am inclined to believe his own version of it."

"In that case we must make the most of this breathing time," she replied. "Annie Hughes must be safely married to Mr. Darby, and then Maria can easily secure this rich Englishman. We must lose no time, for who can tell how soon we may be driven from here?"

Annie's marriage day was fixed that night, and Mrs. Emmerson wrote to her to tell her of it. She also communicated the intelligence to Mr. Darby, who was, of course, quite overjoyed. Latterly he had almost despaired, at times, of ever gaining possession of her, for she but rarely allowed him to see her, and when he was admitted into her presence she was cold and distant, and never referred in the slightest degree to their approaching nuptials. Now, however, the day was fixed, and he looked forward with the utmost eagerness to the hour that would make her legally his.

An expensive *trousseau* was ordered direct from London, and Mrs. Emmerson herself went down to the Glyn and exhibited the treasures it contained; but the dazzling combinations of muslin, silk, and laces had no attraction for the heart-sick girl.

"I am very much obliged to you," she murmured, faintly, "but really I do not want these things. They might suit the future Mrs. Danvers, but for the wife of a minister with seventy pounds a year they are much too costly."

Mrs. Emmerson winced slightly beneath the implied reproach.

"Mr. Darby must have something better than his present post soon," she said; "and as for these things being too expensive, I do not think so. They will heighten your beauty wonderfully."

For what purpose? thought Annie. If she were about to be married to the man of her choice, nothing would have been too splendid, no attire too costly to do honour to her bridegroom; but as it was

she would only be decking herself for a man who was being forced and who forced himself upon her. Her rich attire could scarcely conceal her aching heart when she would have to utter solemn vows of love and obedience to a man she thoroughly despised.

“What are you thinking of, my dear?” asked her visitor and persecutor, with a specious assumption of affection.

“Nothing in particular,” she answered sadly, taking up a lace shawl in a listless apathetic manner, which showed how little she cared about any of this finery.

“You are naturally a little bit gloomy,” went on Mrs. Emmerson. “When the affair is all over and ended, you will shake off these melancholy fancies; and I have promised that if you choose you shall see your brother.”

She had promised a good deal more than she was able to perform, for she really knew nothing of Edward or his whereabouts.

She went away in a short time, and left

Annie to her own sad thoughts. She sat by the window in her usual seat, gazing absently out into the garden, where the waning sunlight cast long shadows beneath the trees,—gazing as if her mind were far away beyond the golden horizon, and not occupied with the troubles of life. And yet she was full of them. She was thinking of the time, so close at hand, when she would be compelled to leave her pleasant home, for whatever might be Mr. Darby's views, she was resolved that he should never dwell in the place consecrated by so many tender memories. She would shut up the house, and in time others would come there and take her place, filling those long-silent rooms once more with life and activity. Other hands would tend the jasmine that twined itself around the windows before which she sat; others would have to care for the lilies that grew in the garden before her, and water the plants which she loved so well. No longer would that peaceful old homestead, where her father

had lived and died, and where her own happy childhood had been spent, be a place of refuge for her; and she could imagine how hard it would be to pass by and see strangers in possession of it, and to know that this room where she sat, her little parlour with its few simple and yet priceless treasures, and her neat little bedroom, were all occupied by those who had no sympathies with her or hers, and that instead of the peace and contentment she had known there, she had obtained in exchange nothing but lifelong misery and weariness of spirit.

Some in her position would have thought that the sacrifice was too great for even a sister's fond love to make, but she never thought of it in this light. She thought only that in giving up the man who loved her so well and whom she also passionately loved, and in accepting this other suitor whom she hated as much as her gentle nature would allow her to do, she was only fulfilling the promise made to her dying parent, that she would never aban-

don her brother, and would strive to do her duty towards him.

And this was her duty—at least, she believed it to be so; and although she felt that the shadows would never pass away from her soul and that she should never experience another day of happiness in this world, still she never hesitated. Her brother was in danger, and to save his life she would gladly have sacrificed her own, if it had been necessary. She thought, too, of Frederick and the pain she knew he was enduring, and this was the saddest part of the matter. She cared but little as to the sorrow she would have to endure, but it grieved her inexpressibly to be compelled to inflict it upon his noble and generous spirit. But it could not be helped, she told herself over and over again, and she firmly believed it—there was no loophole of escape, and in marrying the minister she was only submitting to the inevitable!

She had often wished to take her old nurse into her confidence and to tell her the

whole story. She was the only person in whom she could confide, and to whom she would not hesitate to speak of Edward's guilt and folly. She had made several journeys to the hut on the hills, but it was always untenanted, and even the furniture had been removed. Mrs. Emmerson's threat, although never executed, perhaps never intended to be executed, had the effect of causing the crone to withdraw almost entirely into her mountain fastnesses. There were traces, however, that the place was not completely abandoned, for on her second visit there were indications that a fire had been alight on the hearth since her previous call, and on the third time some *débris* of a meal were strewn about. She had written a note in Welsh and left it there, a note which would have brought the old woman to her speedily if she had seen it, but as she left it on her third visit and found it there when she went again, she concluded that Sian had not visited the hut since.

Time slipped rapidly away and brought her nearer and still nearer to the day upon which she would have to part with her freedom and become the property of the minister, for it was in this light she regarded the marriage contract. She was compelled to go sometimes to Glynarth, but none of the villagers ever congratulated her on her approaching marriage. All seemed to know that she was forced into it against her own inclination, and all pitied the wan, pallid, and yet inexpressibly sweet face which passed in and out among them. Mr. Darby was more unpopular than he had ever been before. He was regarded with aversion even by his own congregation, and he was seriously alarmed lest a church meeting might be called some fine day which would suspend him from his office and compel him to seek a new field for his labours. Unitarian churches he knew were not very numerous in these districts, and the few which were to be found had far abler men as pastors than he was, notwithstanding his philosophy.

He could not walk through the village but that deep significant murmurs assailed his ears, and although no one knew exactly *how* he was influencing Annie against her will, it was unanimously believed that he was acting cruelly and wrongly towards her, and the good people were disposed to side with the oppressed in this as in every other case. The instincts of an ancient and free people made them to abhor coercion in any shape or form, much more when the victim was a young, beautiful, and amiable maiden.

On the Sunday before the Thursday fixed for the wedding, Mr. Campbell was officiating as usual in the afternoon at the little sea-side church, and Annie was at the harmonium for the last time. The little congregation looked up very frequently from their prayers at the pale lovely face before the instrument, and sighed as they reflected that before the next Sunday she would be the wife of a man who had no sympathy with their simple holy faith, and Mr. Campbell's voice trembled a little, and his eyes were

bent upon her as he prayed with more than usual fervour for “all those who are afflicted or distressed in mind, body, or estate.” Annie felt that she was specially referred to, and surrounded though she was by great trouble, she was comforted by the thought that many prayers were being offered up on her behalf.

The worshippers lingered in the churchyard to bid her farewell, as if she were about to leave the country. She felt this, and with difficulty restrained her tears. She was, indeed, about to pass into a sphere where none of her old friends could follow her, and where she could not retain their friendship. The distinction between Jews and Gentiles was not more sharply defined than that between the Church and Dissent in that remote neighbourhood. Annie was about to become a Dissenter, and much as they loved her, she would be, to all intents and purposes, dead to them for the future. The vicar walked with her on her way home, for, as we have said, the Glynarth road ran past

her house. He made no reference to the coming event, for he could not bear to add to her load of sorrow, and to give fresh pain to her bruised spirit.

At the gate they paused. It was the last time, both thought, upon which they should walk together from the house of God; and we all linger over a thing, however trivial, that will never meet us in our lives again.

“God bless you, my child,” he said, with a trembling, agitated voice; “whatever He may have in store for you, may He keep and watch over you always.”

And before she could reply, he was gone, and she found herself entering the house with a bursting heart and crushed spirit. All her friends were being alienated from her by this marriage, and she anxiously asked herself whether she would form new ones who could take their places, but she could see none.

Throughout the whole of the two following days she remained at home. Mr.

Darby called, but was refused admission, on the ground that Miss Hughes was not well. He fumed with rage as he turned away, and promised to pay her off for these repeated slights, so soon as he had the power of doing so.

Early on Wednesday morning she started towards Sian; but in the desperate hope that, even at the last moment, the old woman might save her. There were but few people abroad at the early hour in which she set forth, and, by means of by-roads, she managed to pass the village without being seen by any one who knew her. When she gained the open hill-side she breathed a little more freely, although she felt herself very weak and fatigued long before she reached her destination. The cankering sorrow which had destroyed her peace had left its impress upon the body also. The gloom in her spirit was too great to be dispelled, and the burden almost too great for her to sustain.

She was a long time in reaching the hut ;

but she arrived there at last, and great was her disappointment to find the door open, and everything in precisely the same state as when she had last visited it. She took up the slip of paper on which her note was written, and unfolded it. It was as follows :

“ Mae’n *rhaid* i mi eich gwel’d chwi a hyny ar unwaith. Yr wyf mewn trallod dwfn. Deuwch ar unwaith i’r Glyn.”

Evidently the crone had not returned to her former residence, and this last faint hope was now completely gone. The broken-spirited girl sank on the earth and moaned piteously. She could not weep—her sorrow was too great for tears. She could only return home now, and face the inevitable.

She rose from the ground, and proceeded homewards with slow and heavy steps. Her head ached violently, and her brow was heated and feverish, but she managed to reach home in safety. Here the old woman, who waited upon her, insisted upon her going to bed, and when Mrs. Emmerson called in the afternoon, for the purpose of

making the final arrangements, she was told that Miss Hughes was too unwell to receive visitors. She attributed her indisposition, however, to a dislike on her part to receive her, and she therefore communicated to the old woman all that she wished to tell her, adding that she herself would come down early on the following morning.

Frederick spent the evening in his study, alone with his bitter and sad thoughts. The agony of seeing the girl he loved with his whole soul wedded to another, was apparently in store for him, and he strove to nerve himself for the coming ordeal. The more he thought of her, however, the more miserable he became, and at last he took his hat and went out into the village, where he heard a startling piece of news.

Meanwhile, Mr. Darby was entertaining a few chosen friends at a farewell bachelor's party.

"To-morrow I shall have entered upon a new phase of existence," he said, with his usual philosophical tone of voice; "blessed

with a beautiful bride, I shall emerge from my grub state into that of a butterfly; but the butterfly will last so long as life endures. Lord of the Glyn and its lovely mistress, my lot will be an enviable one indeed."

It was not to come just yet, however, for when he went to accompany his friends on their way homewards, he also heard the tidings which had startled Glynarth from its wonted calm, and philosopher as he was, it sent a cold chill feeling of fear, alarm, and remorse to his heart.

Annie Hughes had been visited with an attack of brain fever!

CHAPTER XI.

TIDINGS OF THE PRODIGAL.

THE windows of the Glyn were carefully darkened, and the house itself was sombre and gloomy, whilst its young mistress struggled with death. Sian was there nursing her foster-child; for when she heard the tidings, she lost not a moment in hurrying to her side. No one else, however, was admitted. Mrs. Emmerson came with specious offers of assistance, but the grim old dame knew her too well to trust her for a moment, and she instructed the servant to decline her proffered aid and advice. Sian did not suspect that Mrs. Emmerson had anything to do with the young lady's illness, for Annie was utterly unconscious, and even

raved with delirium. She spoke of Edward and of Mr. Danvers, and once she went through her memorable conversation with Mrs. Emmerson—a conversation which seemed to have burnt itself into her brain. It was in English, however, and Sian could not understand the whole of it.

Frederick was suffering also. He could perceive how terrible the struggle had been in her breast, and how the poor, weak body gave way beneath the unaccustomed load. His agony, as he thought of what she must have suffered, was very bitter, and the love which he had vainly tried to banish for ever from his heart welled up again with more than its former strength and fervour. Maria Montessor was nothing to him in these days of mental anguish, during which he never left his study, and he almost regarded her with aversion, although she had done nothing new to inspire him with dislike. Still, he was beginning to feel that to marry her would be impossible whilst Annie remained free, and he hoped that this illness

would prove more than a temporary respite for her, and would eventually result in her liberation from her hateful bondage.

Three weeks went by, and Annie was recovering a little. Not a day passed but that Mr. Danvers sent down to the Glyn to make inquiries about her, and the choicest fruit and flowers which his own and Covent Garden could supply were plentifully provided. Sian accepted them all, remembering Annie's confession to her, and being unable to understand the tale which the old woman told her respecting Mr. Darby. Nothing was too costly or too difficult to be procured for her; and Maria and her mother were greatly alarmed when they heard of his attentions to her.

Before Annie had become sufficiently strong to maintain a conversation, Sian disappeared as suddenly as she came, giving no reason for her departure. Another nurse took her place, however; but Annie was very sorry to lose the old woman before she had had an opportunity of relating to her

the troubles in which she was involved. She comforted herself, however, with the reflection that the old crone would doubtless come again to see her before Mrs. Emerson would have time again to weave her toils around her.

Mr. Danvers was but seldom seen at Montessor House. He was of course compelled to call sometimes as a matter of form, but he gave Maria to understand, not by words, but by his manner, that she had proposed to him, and that he was not particularly anxious to hurry on the marriage as she appeared to be. He sometimes doubted whether the ardent affection she professed towards him was real or not, and he thought that she might have deceived herself, and mistaken a mere passing fancy for a serious attachment. Mrs. Emmerson was greatly annoyed, however, at this delay, and one day she opened her mind to her lord and master.

“It is time we did something in reference to Maria’s marriage, Henry,” she said.

“Mr. Danvers shows no inclination whatever to bring the matter to an issue; and if he goes on as he is doing at present, his courtship will last twenty years, unless he takes it into his head to break it off.”

“Have you any new scheme to bring him to the point?” asked Mr. Emmerson, curiously.

“It is not exactly a scheme. You always take it for granted that things must be done in a tortuous, underhand way, when a straightforward course would do equally as well. You must speak to the gentleman, as Maria’s step-father, and ask him, point-blank, what are his intentions.”

Emmerson grinned. He rather liked a task which promised some amusement, and he would have liked it still better if he had known that the young lady had proposed to the gentleman. Hitherto, however, he had not been told this.

“Has he said nothing to you about it?” he asked, in order that he might be fully informed as to all the circumstances.

“Have you no idea why he is so reluctant to come to the point, as you call it?”

“Yes; I know perfectly well why he is a little tardy,” she answered, crossly. “He formed an absurd attachment for that girl who was to have been married to the Unitarian minister, and I am afraid he will not marry Maria whilst the other is free. You heard of this love-affair before, of course, and you ought to have known why he was so tardy. There was another thing you did not know. Maria had to lead him on, and draw him out, in order to get him to propose. Now he would like to withdraw from the engagement, if we will allow him.”

“And I suppose you will not allow him?”

“Certainly not. I have schemed and laboured too hard to bring it about to let the bird slip when he is caged. You must speak to him seriously and plainly, and call upon him, as a man of honour, to fulfil his word.”

“Very well; I will do so at once,” replied

her husband. "I may as well go over to the Lodge this afternoon and talk the matter over."

And he went, finding Mr. Danvers smoking beneath the shade of the trees in the garden, and appearing rather more cheerful than usual. He sprang up to receive Mr. Emerson, and proposed that they should go into the house.

"I would prefer remaining here for a little while," replied he. "I have come over for the purpose of having a little serious conversation with you, and it may as well take place here as elsewhere."

Frederick knew in a moment what was coming, and what he had to expect. His companion drew forth his cigar-case, and, selecting a weed, he proceeded to light it, in a calm, leisurely manner; and, when this was accomplished to his satisfaction, he stretched himself upon one of the garden-seats near to his friend.

"Anything very important?" asked Mr. Danvers, with a smile. "The weather is

almost too warm for business, but, nevertheless, I am all attention."

"Well, then, my dear fellow, the thing is simply this," commenced Mr. Emmerson, with a familiar air and tone. "I am given to understand that my amiable and accomplished step-daughter and yourself are engaged to one another, and the arrangement has been made some time ago. Now, my dear fellow, you are of course aware how these matters must terminate—in marriage; and I have no doubt you are anxiously awaiting an opportunity to bring your engagement to this point. Is it not so?"

"Hardly," replied Mr. Danvers, very gravely and deliberately. "You declared your intention to speak plainly on this rather delicate subject, and I will do so likewise. I cannot deny the existence of an engagement between Miss Montessor and myself,—an engagement which was formed under very exceptional circumstances,—with which you are perhaps acquainted. I have the very greatest respect for the lady,

but I have no reason to think there is any deeper feeling on either side.”

“Then you wish to break it off?” demanded Emmerson, sharply.

“Do not misunderstand me,” pursued Mr. Danvers, scarcely noticing the interruption. “I believe that thousands of happy marriages have been contracted, based on no deeper feeling than mutual respect and esteem; and this may be another of the kind; but I wish to point out that in these peculiar circumstances there is no necessity for any hurry. If it comes off eventually we ought all to be satisfied, and, of course, I am pledged in honour to fulfil my part of the engagement.”

“My dear fellow, I do not see why it should be indefinitely postponed,” remarked Mr. Emmerson, persuasively. “As men of the world, we ought to know how to arrange these things, and settle the matter at once.”

This chaff about “men of the world” might have flattered a younger and vainer man, but it was lost on Frederick, who was,

in fact, rather annoyed by it. He began to suspect Mr. and Mrs. Emerson of a design to force him into matrimony, and no one likes that.

“I have made up my mind as to the course to be pursued,” he replied. “I do not see the necessity for hurrying the matter on at all; neither does the young lady, for she has not spoken to me on the subject herself. Perhaps you will say that she feels it nevertheless. It may be so, but marriage at this moment would seriously inconvenience me, and it is, in fact, quite out of the question.”

“The long and short of it is, you want to get out of the business altogether, Mr. Danvers,” said Emerson, with something very like an oath.

“I wish to do nothing of the kind,” was the emphatic reply. “I simply tell you that I am unwilling that the ceremony should take place at this moment, for reasons of my own——”

“Reasons which are no doubt connected

with Miss Annie Hughes," interrupted Emmerson, with a sneer.

"It does not concern you in the least to know what my reasons are," was the haughty rejoinder. "You are quite at liberty to make any surmises which you may think proper, but I do not acknowledge your right to pry into my private affairs in any way whatever."

Emmerson had sufficient sense to see that no good could be effected by irritating him, and he accordingly adopted a more amicable tone.

"You must excuse me," he said, with a forced laugh. "I was only joking; and, naturally, I am interested in my step-daughter, and anxious to see her fairly established in life. If you object to this marriage now, give me an idea as to when it will suit you."

"Say in three months—three months from to-day," replied Mr. Danvers, who wished to close the discussion; "that is not long for you to wait, and, if it suits the young lady, it will suit me."

“Very good—three months from to-day it shall be,” said Mr. Emmerson.

His wife, however, was by no means satisfied as to the result of this conversation. A great many things might happen in three months, and she was even eager to speak to him on the subject herself.

“You had better not, unless you want to have the whole thing knocked on the head,” said Mr. Emmerson, very decidedly. “He was snappish and unpleasant with me; and if you mentioned the matter he would at once jump to the conclusion that we were determined to marry him to Maria with or without his consent. You had much better leave him alone.”

There was consideration in this view, and, fortunately for herself, Mrs. Emmerson saw it. He had agreed to marry her daughter in a reasonable time, and she could not well re-open the question.

Left to himself, Mr. Danvers became absorbed in deep and painful thought. He had at last finally pledged himself to marry

Miss Montessor, and that before Annie was married. For aught he knew to the contrary, Annie might never marry Mr. Darby; and yet *he* was bound, as fast as his plighted word could make him, to another! It was rumoured in the village that the match between the minister and Annie had been broken off, but there was no foundation for the report, beyond the obvious fact patent to all, that she strongly disliked him, and that he was either forcing himself, or being forced upon her.

As he sat there he heard a sudden rustling in the trees beside him, and Sian, more ragged and wild-looking than when he had seen her before, made her appearance. She spoke not a word, but simply held out a slip of paper. His heart beat very quickly, as he thought that it might be from Annie; but a glance at the address showed that it was not her handwriting.

He had opened it in an instant, and read its contents:—

“I am dying,” the writer said; “but, before I die, I must see you and Annie. The bearer will tell you where to find me, and will conduct you here—come.

“EDWARD HUGHES.”

Frederick was greatly shocked when he read this message. He glanced at the old woman, who, with folded arms, was watching him intently, and asked, “Where is he?”

She pointed towards the hills.

“In yon cottage?” he demanded.

“No; in the mountains,” she replied, with a better accent than he expected.

“I thought you were unable to speak English,” he said.

“Can’t,” she replied; “only a few words.”

“When am I to come?” he asked.
“May I come now?”

“No,” she said, laconically; “to-night I will fetch you.”

Before he could ask her any further ques-

tions she was gone, and he could only wait until she thought proper to come and fetch him.

The note spoke of Annie. Was he to meet her at her brother's death-bed, and was there any hope that their alienation would be ended? A strong desire to be free from Maria, and once more linked with the girl he loved, took possession of him ; but he did not see how to effect it. He was bound in honour to marry Maria, and there was no escape. He told himself so a dozen times, but still his mind reverted to the subject.

Mr. Campbell called shortly before dinner, and Mr. Danvers showed him the missive he had received.

"I presume I may speak on the whole subject now," said the vicar. "Circumstances have changed since the time when you prohibited me from doing so, and this note brings the whole affair up again. It seems to me, my dear sir, that coercion was employed in Miss Hughes's case, and

that her brother was the unconscious instrument in the hands of some enemy of yours and hers.”

Mrs. Emmerson would have been greatly startled if she had been present. The guess was a good one, but the vicar had not penetrated the secret.

“As how?” asked Mr. Danvers.

“This person, whoever it may be, might have represented to her that her brother was disgraced and ruined for ever, and that she was acting very wrongly towards you in linking you at all with a dishonoured name. Her feelings may have been worked upon to such an extent as to induce her to give you up.”

“How do you account, then, for the fact that she accepted the minister?” asked Mr. Danvers. “She must have objected strongly to him, for she told me her opinion of him in sufficiently plain terms, and her illness shows that there was no great amount of love lost between them.”

“You are right; that cannot be explained

on my theory," said the vicar, although Mr. Danvers had not said that it could not be explained. "She must have had the strongest objection to him, for everybody could see it with half an eye, and I believe she never allowed him to come near her."

"I am really at a loss to understand it, and I have given it up in despair," observed Frederick. "I should very much like, however, to have an hour's conversation with her. I should ask her plainly for an explanation, and I do not think she could refuse it."

"I do not think she *would*, at all events," replied the vicar. "You may have an opportunity to-night, and, at least, the painful mystery which has surrounded this unfortunate lad will be removed. He is, doubtless, in some of the caves in the hills, attended by this old crone and other members of her mysterious creed. I almost envy you the prospect of being admitted into the sacred caverns, as they think them to be."

And in conversation they beguiled the time until Sian tapped at the window.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. EMMERSON IS UNCOMFORTABLE.

MR. DANVERS was not the only one who received an exciting letter that day, for, about an hour after his return, Mr. Emerson received a queer-looking letter, which disturbed him greatly. The bag was late, in consequence of some hitch in the postal arrangements; and these hitches very frequently occurred, so that, although the mail was due at noon, it often happened that the good people of Glynarth received their letters at the tea-table.

This was one of these occasions, and the bag was put into Mrs. Emmerson's hands; for she kept the key, and the excitement of receiving and examining the letters was one of her chief daily pleasures.

On this particular day there were but a few, and one of them was a dirty-looking envelope, which had once been white, but was then of an uncertain hue. The address, to "Henry Emmerson, Esq.," was written in a scrawling, almost illegible hand, beginning at the upper left-hand corner, and extending over the surface of the envelope. The stamp was stuck on at the lower left-hand corner, and the sender was evidently a wholly illiterate person.

Whether it came from a male or female she could not determine, but she had an idea that the handwriting greatly resembled that of ignorant servant girls, who all write in pretty much the same style. What could such a person, or indeed any one so low in the social scale, have to write to *her* husband? She forgot who her husband was, or rather had been; for when she married him, his individuality became merged in hers. She was a lady, and therefore her husband must be a gentleman, she reasoned.

She was half inclined to open the suspicious letter, but she dreaded the outburst of wrath which would descend upon her if he discovered it. Hitherto he had acted fairly towards her. He had not attempted to dictate to her, and he allowed her to have her own way entirely, in return for a similar concession on her part. He was not her master, but he certainly was not her slave; and she was not sure what would be the result of a contest for supremacy, if it should take place. In her heart she dreaded as well as hated this man, and it was advisable not to rouse him from his present dormant state. Their policy in their domestic life was one of mutual toleration, and she feared to depart from it.

The final result of her meditations was that she despatched a servant with the letter to Mr. Emerson, who was lying on the grass upon the lawn, smoking a cigar in the sun. She could see him as he took it from the girl, and she noticed that he sprang into a sitting posture when his eye fell upon

it. His back, however, was turned towards her, so that she could not see his face. The incident was a trivial one, but it created an indefinable doubt and suspicion in Mrs. Emerson's mind, that some discreditable feature in her husband's early life threatened both of them with danger and disgrace. She had no proof of this, but, as a rule, our fears are based more upon supposition than fact, and it was so in this case.

The letter came from the first Mrs. Emerson. He recognised her "fist," as he called it, at once, and ground his teeth with rage, as he saw that by some means or other she had discovered his full address.

It stared him in the face in the most uncompromising manner, and every word was correctly spelt, a circumstance which led him to think that she had been assisted by some one in its production.

She wrote crossly, and even violently, upbraiding him for his lengthy absence from home, and accusing him of being engaged

in some nefarious scheme prejudicial to her interests. She also threatened that unless he returned home, she would take steps to follow him. This last threat was an awful one to the perplexed man, for he was aware that she was capable of going to any extreme, if she discovered that he had married another woman.

Stretching himself again on the grass, he reviewed his position, and the retrospect was a gloomy one. This woman, to whom he had tied himself, was submissive enough in most matters, but he was sure that she would be exasperated beyond endurance when she found out his infidelity; and she would disclose his crime, if not to the officers of the law, at least to the woman whom he had wronged and deluded, and his downfall would be as speedy and sudden as his elevation.

In some respects he would not regret this. He would be sorry that his opportunities for supplying himself with money were at an end, but he would be glad to be

rid of the formal, monotonous life he was now leading. Beer and skittles and card-playing were the chief delights of life to him, and here he was completely debarred from them. Six o'clock dinners did not agree very well with him, and many of the polite usages in which Mrs. Emmerson delighted were highly distasteful to him; so that, upon the whole, he would not regret a removal from so uncongenial a sphere. He wished, however, to feather his nest comfortably before the blow came, and, as yet, he had not done so.

How could he avert the impending storm, which was gathering so blackly above his head? This was the question which he tried to answer, but which perplexed him the more deeply he pondered upon it. One thing was clear—he must see his wife, and endeavour, by menaces or promises, to turn her from her expressed purpose. How he could contrive to effect this without arousing Mrs. Emmerson's suspicions was more than he could decide upon at that moment;

but, in any case, it must be done, he decided.

Chance favoured him, however, for in two or three days afterwards—days which were spent by him in a state of great doubt and alarm—a letter came from Edmund Montessor, dated from the same place in London, stating that he had been robbed of all his money whilst travelling on the Continent, and asking for another two hundred pounds, to enable him to tide over his affairs until the end of the year. The tone was mild—almost apologetic—but still firm and decisive. Mrs. Emmerson groaned as she read it.

“This man will give us no peace until he has completely drained us,” she said to Mr. Emmerson; “this story is, no doubt, a pure invention from beginning to end, and I suppose he means to keep up this system of plunder so long as he wishes us to have the trouble of looking after the estate, whilst he reaps the profits.”

She spoke of him as if he were not the

rightful owner, and only a barefaced impostor. Nay, she even believed herself to be a greatly wronged and injured person.

“Will you let him have this money?” he asked, with some anxiety. She was the paymaster in the household, and she signed all the cheques.

“I suppose we must submit to his demand,” she replied, half doubtfully; “he must be given distinctly to understand, however, that if he troubles me again I shall resist at all hazard. Who shall I send with it, I wonder?”

She looked keenly into his face, and if he had not been conscious of the secret he wished to conceal from her, he would have demanded angrily why she did not entrust him with the commission, as on the previous occasion.

“Why not take it yourself?” he asked.

“I dare not venture into his presence,” she replied. “I could never look into his face, knowing as he does how effectually I

would have disposed of him if I could. No, I cannot go."

"Send it by post, then," he suggested.

"How can I do that?" she asked, angrily. "I wish to tell him distinctly and emphatically that I shall not submit to his extortions any longer, and that cannot be done by post. If you were half a man you would go up to London and rid me of him for ever. There are plenty of ways of disposing of troublesome people in London, but you are too chicken-hearted to avail yourself of them."

"I can try," he said, cautiously. "I know the dark side of London much better than you do, and I am not at all sure that I should succeed, but I could make the attempt."

"There must be no clumsy bungling this time," she said significantly; "if you fail he will make an outcry, and expose us, for he will know that he has nothing to hope from our forbearance. Unless you are confident of success do not attempt it at all."

He promised to obey her implicitly, and

it was therefore decided that he was to be the bearer of the required money to London. Mrs. Emmerson told Maria that evening of his intended visit to the metropolis, and the young lady was curious to learn the cause which gave rise to this sudden journey.

“Important business, my dear,” replied her mother.

“You never had important business in London before you married this man,” said Maria. “I am afraid you drew yourself into trouble when you accepted him.”

“Perhaps I did,” replied her mother, “or rather I was in trouble before I married him. I have had nothing but care and anxiety for a very long time now, and I see no way to extricate myself.”

Her tone was weary and gloomy, and it was a fitting index of her state of mind. Her sin had found her out much quicker than she had anticipated.

“What is it all about?” asked Maria, eagerly; “the house has been full of puzzles and mysteries lately, and not the least

among them was your marriage. You never explained it to me, mamma, and yet no one has a better right to know it.”

“It could do you no good if I told you the whole miserable story—it would add to your anxieties without lightening mine. It is far better that you should be in ignorance of it.”

“I do not agree with you, mamma, and even if you still persist in keeping it from me, it may force itself out in spite of your precautions. Has it anything to do with the Edmund Montessor you spoke of some time ago ? ”

“Yes, it has to do entirely with him,” assented her mother. “The fact is, he is alive and in England, and we are endeavouring to keep him away from here,—that is all ! ”

Maria thought it quite enough, and wondered what were the means employed by her mother to keep him from Glynarth, but on this point Mrs. Emmerson would vouchsafe no information.

“It will do you no good if I tell you,” she said, decisively, “and it will only give you needless anxiety. Let it satisfy you to know that he will not put in his claim, at least for the present, and your object should be to secure Mr. Danvers. Whatever may happen to us, you will be safe as his wife.”

Maria could extract no more from her, and with this meagre information she was compelled to be contented.

Mr. Emmerson was driven over to the railway station next morning, and in due time arrived in London. His first visit was to the address indicated in Edmund Montessor's letter, and he wrote that evening to Glynarth, saying that he believed the story respecting the robbery of the money, and that Edmund Montessor had promised most faithfully not to molest them again until the end of the year.

This business being satisfactorily disposed of, he repaired to his own home, where his wife was surprised and rather alarmed to see him. It was not so easy to meet her

faithless husband face to face as it was to write an angry letter to him when he was at a distance. He brushed past her into the house, and seated himself on a rickety couch to await his trembling wife.

“I have come, you see,” he said, sarcastically. “It was impossible to resist the tender appeal in the letter you sent me, although I had ordered you not to bother me with any more of your complaints. You are such a dutiful wife, aren’t you?”

“Quite as dutiful a wife as you are a husband,” she answered, mustering up sufficient courage to face the angry, sneering man. “You go away for weeks and months, and never tell me where you are, nor what you are doing, and think it enough to let me have a wretched little sum of money which will only keep body and soul together. That is how you treat me, and you can’t deny it.”

“I treat you far better than you deserve, you hussy,” he answered, fiercely. “I wish I had never seen you at all, and never made

a fool of myself by marrying you. You are a regular nuisance, sending dirty, impudent letters after me continually as you do. I should like to know how you got hold of my address? ”

“ That was easy enough,” she said. “ You left a luggage card behind here, and I found it, or else I should never have known where you were. I want to know what you are doing at this place ; and I will know it.”

“ You won’t,” he shouted, with a fearful oath ; “ if you don’t shut up I’ll settle you for life. I won’t stand your impudence any longer.”

He made a movement towards her, but, frightened by his ferocity, she made her escape from the room, and left him to himself. His reflections were by no means pleasant. He was glad to find that no enemy of his had furnished her with his address, but he did not like her evident determination to find out his secret. She was a determined woman in her way, and

although she feared him when he had recourse to open violence, she dreaded nothing else, and he could not be always at hand to frighten her with threats of his vengeance. She might be terrified whilst he was on the spot, but when he was gone he knew her courage would revive, and she would be as unpleasant as before. He saw no way to extricate himself from his difficulties, and, in order to distract his attention, he took his hat and went out into the crowded streets. He sauntered idly up and down for hours, still thinking of the problem he had to solve; and when he grew weary of this amusement he turned into a low beer-shop, and called for some brandy. He was the only occupant of the room, and there he remained until nightfall, drinking and smoking. Sometimes he felt inclined to tell his wife exactly how he was situated, and persuade her that when he had collected a sufficient sum of money he would return to her, and they could leave England to enjoy

abroad their ill-gotten gains. That would have been the simplest plan, but he knew her nature well enough to feel convinced that she would never allow him to remain in Glynarth an hour as another woman's husband; and he was reluctantly compelled to give up this idea. Nothing else occurred to him, however, and he was just about to return home, when he happened to take up an old newspaper which lay upon one of the benches. It was dated nearly two months before, and he was about to cast it from him, when a paragraph caught his eye, which made him pause. It consisted only of four lines, but it was deeply interesting to him.

“An English gentleman of fortune has disappeared recently, and hitherto no trace of him has been found. He was last heard of in a remote part of South Wales, but his fate is shrouded in the deepest mystery. The police are actively investigating the matter.”

So ran the paragraph, and it filled him with wild alarm. He jumped at once to the conclusion that the unfortunate man who

had perished instead of Edmund Montessor was the gentleman referred to; and although he had not much cause for making this supposition, the more he considered the matter the more nervous and terrified he became. This great dread revived again when he had long since supposed himself to be perfectly safe, and he arose from his seat with shaking hands and knees that smote against each other. He made his way homewards through the most secluded streets, and he often glanced nervously backwards, half expecting to feel the iron grip of the law upon his shoulder.

He reached home safely, however, and for hours he remained in a dazed, bewildered state of mind, listening to the noises in the street with guilty alarm. The threatening shadows were gathering thickly around him. He was a murderer and a bigamist, and a man of so doubtful a character, that if ever he stood at the bar of a court of justice, many unpleasant incidents in his past life would be remembered and brought up against

him. His real wife might at any moment expose him, and in that case he knew Mrs. Montessor well enough to feel convinced that she would show him no mercy. At any cost she would punish him for so gross an outrage, and in fact he saw no end to the complications which would ensue. Where he was drifting to he knew not, but it was into a dark, shoreless, echoless ocean of guilt, from which he could never emerge!

His wife came in at length, wondering what had become of him, and found him with a haggard, despairing face resting upon his arms. She had loved him once, and something of the old affection revived as she looked upon him in that moment of dread and horror.

“What is the matter, Henry?” she asked, more gently than was her wont.

“Nothing that you can help,” was the gloomy reply; “only you can comfort yourself by knowing that you have helped me into this trouble.”

“How?”

“By annoying me continually with your letters. I did not want them—they did you no good; why should you send them? I want you to look at the matter as I do, and be sensible for once.”

He was in a more reasonable mood than usual, and hoped to appease her thus. She would be one danger the less in his way if only she left him unmolested. This mode of address proved more efficacious than any other with her, and at that moment she was very sorry for him. He was a thoroughly bad man, but then he was her husband, and she loved him after her own fashion.

“I do not want to trouble you,” she said. “I am sorry to see you so miserable, and, if I could be sure you would not get me and yourself into trouble, I would leave you alone; but I cannot understand what you can be doing at that outlandish Welsh place.”

“It would be of no use my telling you,” he answered, “and I want you to promise not to try and find out. I am making lots

of money there—you may be sure of that ; and when I have made enough we will go abroad, and live like kings ; but if you try and find out what I am doing, you will spoil all.”

“ I am afraid you will get into trouble, Henry,” she said, doubtfully.

“ I shall, if you do not leave me alone,” he answered, moodily ; “ you have done me more mischief than you can well imagine, as it is ; and I want you to promise to leave me alone for a short time. You will only injure me, without benefiting yourself, as it is now. Will you leave me alone for the future ? ”

She promised, at last, to do so ; and, after giving her some money, and again exhorting her to leave him unmolested, he went away to the railway station.

London was not a safe place for him just then, and yet Glynarth was, if possible, more dangerous ; but, trusting to his luck, he determined to return, and he was one of the passengers who left Euston Square, in that night’s mail, for South Wales.

He was rushing blindly on to destruction !

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EXPIRING LIFE.

FREDERICK DANVERS stood in the moonlight before his house, and looked around for the crone who had given the signal. She was at his side in a few moments, and he noticed that she looked even paler and more haggard than usual. She beckoned him to follow her, and then led the way to the road, along which she hastened with a speed that was marvellous, considering her age and apparent feebleness. He could barely discern her form in the darkness which surrounded him, and he found some difficulty in keeping her in sight. Once only she halted for a moment, and allowed him to come up, as if she had something

to say to him ; but if that were the case, she changed her mind, and again set off without a word, leaving him to follow as best he might.

She turned down the dark, narrow lane which led to her hut, and he came at once to the conclusion that the sick lad was there. He was mistaken, however. There was a light in the place, and a young lady dressed in black, who, it needed no second glance to show, was Annie Hughes. She sat near the peat fire, with her fair head resting on her hands, lost in gloomy abstraction, as they entered. She knew no more of the whereabouts of her brother than did Mr. Danvers. She had received a note, to the same effect as that which we have already seen, and she had made her way at once to the hut, in the hope of finding him, but he was not there. Then she sat down to await the appearance of the old woman and Mr. Danvers.

He had not seen her, except once, since her renunciation of him, and upon that one

solitary occasion he had but caught a glimpse of her returning home, leaning upon Mr. Darby's arm. There was a touch of romance about that walk, which afterwards came to his knowledge. He had watched Annie going to the village, and had waited for her upon her return. The girl felt ill and weary upon that night, and her head seemed to ache so that it was almost ready to split asunder. This being the case, she was glad to accept the arm which her obnoxious admirer offered. She dismissed him at the gate, and he returned home with a lighter heart than usual. It was something that she accepted his escort at all, and, upon this slight foundation, he reared up a wonderful superstructure of hope and expectations, which were doomed to be rudely shattered. In after years, when she had gone from his reach for ever, he remembered that brief period of happiness.

He stood gazing in silence upon her until the old crone went out again, and then he spoke.

“It is a long time since we saw one another last, Miss Hughes,” he said, half reproachfully, although he strove to make his voice steady and indifferent.

“A very long time,” she answered, without looking up, for she could not meet the gaze that was bent upon her.

“It has not been a happy time for you, I fear,” he said, gently; “you have had sorrow and trouble to endure.”

“We all have that to meet and bear,” she answered. “I have had more than I expected, and now the greatest trouble of all is at hand.”

She was thinking of her brother, and he understood her. He made no reply, but still stood watching her. How strange it was that this girl, whom he loved so dearly, should be so widely separated from him, for Maria Montessor, whom he had never loved, and for whom he could never feel the slightest affection, stood between them. Her face was averted from his earnest, pitying gaze; but through the gloom which

seemed to cling around her like a veil he could see that she was weeping—weeping for her brother, and also for those happy hours of the brief, bright past which had slipped from her reach. Young in years, she was old in spirit—old with that age which nothing but heart-sickness and weariness can produce. How his heart ached as he saw her fair head drooping upon her breast, and how gladly he would have taken her to his arms if he dared! But he could not. Maria Montessor and Mr. Darby both stood in the way, and the wild impulse was checked as speedily as it had arisen.

Sian returned in about ten minutes' time, and spoke to Annie in Welsh. The girl arose from her seat, and, turning to Frederick, she said, in a broken, agitated voice:

“She has come to fetch us. My brother is at some distance from here. Let us follow her.”

The old woman had already left the hut, and they followed her.

The night was dark, for the moon was

concealed by heavy clouds, and the sky was starless.

Frederick walked by Annie's side, whilst before them could be seen the dim, indistinct figure of the old woman hurrying on as fast as her strength would enable her to go. Indeed, the two young people found it a difficult matter to keep pace with her, and Annie once remonstrated with her, but to no purpose. She did not turn her head, but still hurried forward.

They were leaving the high road behind, and were entering upon a wilder region than any Frederick had seen before. It was mountainous and almost destitute of vegetation. Even the grass seemed withered and dying, and a few rocks interspersed around increased the unpleasant effect upon the minds of the beholders. Not a single bird warbled its notes on high, and the sound of their own footsteps caused them to start suddenly when they struck against a stone, and to look behind them with unconcealed dread. Frederick

was half sorry that he had entered upon the adventure at all; but Annie sped onwards with unflagging pace, for was not her only brother dying, and might not every moment be of vital importance to her, who so earnestly wished to see him before he closed his eyes for ever upon a life which had been full of sorrow for him?

At length they came to an opening in a rock—a large, towering mass, which cast a gloomy shadow around—and into this strange entrance the old crone passed. Frederick and Annie followed her, although they had nothing but the sound of her footsteps to guide them, and were compelled to grope their way through the narrow passage. They seemed to be descending into the bowels of the earth, for gradually the way became less stony and uneven, and Frederick rightly guessed that this portion had been cut out by human labour. At length the old woman stopped, and gave a peculiar tap upon a door which

barred their further progress, but which was immediately thrown open.

A flood of light streamed forth, and, when Frederick was able to discern the objects before him, he saw a large room, capable of containing from thirty to forty persons. Three old women, dressed in the gown and petticoat commonly assumed by the Welsh peasant women, and with coloured handkerchiefs bound over their heads, sat around a large peat fire, which blazed upon the floor at one end of the apartment, and a few torches were placed in rude niches in the walls. On one side was a low couch, and a young man, wearing a suit of common fustian, sat at the head of it. He was a grave, studious-looking man, of about twenty-four or twenty-five; and his neat appearance indicated that he had seen the world, and had mingled more with men than his presence in this strange locality would lead one to expect. On the couch lay a wan, wasted figure, evidently hovering between

life and death, and, changed though he was, Annie ran up to his side with outstretched arms.

“Oh Edward, my brother!” she exclaimed, as she fell on her knees beside him, and then burst into tears.

Frederick stood aloof, for he felt that the sister's sorrow was too sacred to be intruded upon.

“Where have you been, Edward?” she asked. “How could you conceal yourself for such a long and weary time from your own sister—the sister who loved you so well? It has nearly broken my heart—and to find you *thus*.”

“Better thus than amid the reckless scenes of former days,” murmured the dying youth. “Oh, Annie, my darling, what a wicked and wasted life mine has been! Health and strength wasted for ever, reputation destroyed, and almost crime itself to stain my soul,—but from that I was preserved. I could not write. I could not communicate with you, for the

first step into the free light of heaven might have sealed my doom, and cast me into a felon's prison. And now what have I to look forward to?"

"To a future where man's intrigues are unknown," said the young stranger, solemnly, and his voice echoed through the caverned vault; "to a land where the soul is purified from the corruption of the earth, and where all the sages of our faith are assembled to welcome one of the few believers which remain into the home of unfading summer. The music which sighed amid the forests of Britain in the days when the sacred fire still blazed upon our altars will welcome thee to the halls of light; the shadows of a cruel and faithless world will no longer darken thy spirit."

Annie was alarmed by the solemn utterances of the mysterious Druid, and she whispered to her brother, whose hand was clasped in her own, "You cannot have renounced the Saviour of the world for a faith like this?"

He made no response, for his strength was failing, but he who had spoken answered her question.

“He could not renounce what he has never believed in, and the religion which you cling to has been nothing but a name to him. It is not so with our faith. You boast of your traditions, but what are they compared with ours? In the dim light of a hoar antiquity, our religion is seen in the zenith of its power, and *we* cannot trace the beginning of a creed which had no beginning, and can have no end. It exists in the murmur of the breeze and the roar of the ocean, as it dashes on its rock-girt shore. The sighing of the foliage, and every whisper of Nature, speaks of our faith; and it is well that your brother’s soul should be freed from its earthly trammels, to unite again with the great Spirit of the universe, to wander on the tearless, voiceless, and yet joyous shores—in time, and yet above it.”

Edward was listening eagerly to the voice

which had often spoken of these things, and it excited him more than his strength could well bear. Frederick advanced to the stranger, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

“The scene is too sacred,” he said, almost in a whisper; “let him die alone with his sister.”

He nodded assent, and made a sign to the women, which caused them to leave the apartment, and then Frederick and he withdrew into the open air. As they were leaving, Annie looked at him with an imploring look in her eyes—a look which he readily interpreted.

“We will come back,” he whispered; “but you must have many things to say to him, and we leave you for awhile.”

Her tear-dimmed eyes were bent upon him for one moment in deep gratitude, and, moved to the depths of his soul, he hurried away.

Outside, the Unknown was waiting for him—standing on a ledge of the rock, and contemplating the landscape wrapped in awful darkness.

Frederick touched him lightly on the shoulder, for he did not appear to be aware of his presence.

“I wished to leave them alone,” he said, “for a sister must have much to say to her dying brother—and dying here in the wilderness.”

“And why not in the wilderness?” asked his companion. “Is death more welcome when his icy tread is heard on marble thresholds, and his hand laid upon forms stretched on the voluptuous couches of the great? Great, and yet how little in their knowledge and their faith! It is you Christians that have invested a simple change in the conditions of existence with terrors which do not belong to it. Is the soul less happy because it has no longer to debase itself with the sordid and grovelling pursuits of so-called civilization—less happy because it returns to the land of pure existence, where the spirits of the wise of all ages are assembled? It is you who surround the miserable clay, which is no part of us,

with the hideous trappings of woe, and weep, as if the soul that you loved could be boxed up and imprisoned in the earth.”

“True, but even the clay of those we love ought to be sacred to us,” said Frederick, gravely.

“Not when the soul itself hovers near us, and speaks to us in the spirit-voices of the wind!—not when it is even near to us in our sleeping and waking dreams. It is sweet to be free, and therefore it is sweet to die, for death is boundless, unlimited freedom.”

“And what is there in the spirit-realms awaiting us?” asked Frederick.

“Pleasure in its purest and highest form—everything which renders life valuable and sweet, but purified from the evils of the world. There is music there—poetry there—art there—beauty and eloquence dwell in the gardens of Paradise; for art and poetry, music and eloquence, flow from thence, and we go to their fountain head.”

“And is there a God there?”

“A Being who rules the universe there must be,” he replied, slowly and deliberately. “His footsteps are impressed upon every leaf and blade of grass; and to those who, in the mountain solitudes of the world, study the mysteries of nature, His voice is ever heard. But the God of the Druids is not the God of the Christians—a Being who must be worshipped in temples of marble and coloured glass, and whose ministers are arrayed in old women’s finery. With your religion you have blended the worst features of your civilization; but *we* teach that, to serve the Supreme Being, it is necessary to adhere to the simplicity of our forefathers, and to bend the knee only in the vast temple of nature.”

“Then you think that our civilization is wrong? Would you have the whole world residing in mountain caves?”

“No; nor do we reside in these caverns; we retire here when the corrupt spirit of the world renders communion with nature desirable; but we regard civilization as the

greatest curse which can befall a race. *We* are poor and happy, *you* are rich and miserable. It has watered your plains with blood in a manner which the ancient Britons, rude and lawless as they were, would have shrunk with horror from ; it kills you in the spring-time of life, by compelling you to wear out your bodies and your mental powers ; it has made your so-called holy religion into a huge system of endless brawlings, quarrels, and persecutions. To us the one mighty Being is visible in every orb of light in the black canopy above our heads ; and the wintry blasts of the storm, which your boasted science tells you is nothing more than an atmospheric disturbance, is to us His voice calling us to worship Him. What are the discoveries of modern times of attraction, of electricity, of the great secrets of chemistry, and a hundred similar questions, but an attempt to fathom by the mere light of intellect and art truths which have been known throughout all ages to the humble student in the laboratory of nature?

And so it is with your faith. The holy mysteries which flourished in our sacred groves when Goths and Vandals, Greeks and Romans, ruled in turn over other lands, can never perish ; but your creed of yesterday will vanish and be buried in the dust of Time."

"And this is the comfort which you have to offer to a dying youth, and the well-nigh broken-hearted sister?" asked Frederick, in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

"What more can you desire, child of the earth?" asked the Unknown, haughtily. "Although the shadows may thicken around our own doom, death to the wise but unfolds a new and illimitable field of research. There is no comfort in the fable, that we are destined either to endure unutterable torments, or else to experience bliss, of whose nature you yourselves are quite ignorant. What is your heaven? and in what does its joy consist? Who of all the conflicting sects are to tread its crystal pavements? and what are the conditions by

which access may be gained to it? You cannot answer, for you do not know, nor does anyone else. According to your own views, the land beyond the grave is peopled with mysterious forms and unknown bliss or woe."

"But what else does your faith offer to the believer? If anything, it is still more mystic and dark."

"Only to the uninitiated," was the reply. "We teach that the land of summer brightness is but a glorified model of this beautiful world, with all its darkness and sorrow left behind; that those who have striven, so far as possible, to be wise, and to follow the dictates of that living religion which is written on everything around us, will enter the golden portals, and that this land is everywhere around us, if only our mortal eyes could perceive it. Even now I feel the spirit-forms of the wise and the great hovering around me, though I cannot hear their voices; but often their music, which is not of the earth, comes to fill with

a new and strange love those of us still struggling onwards towards the perfection of knowledge.”

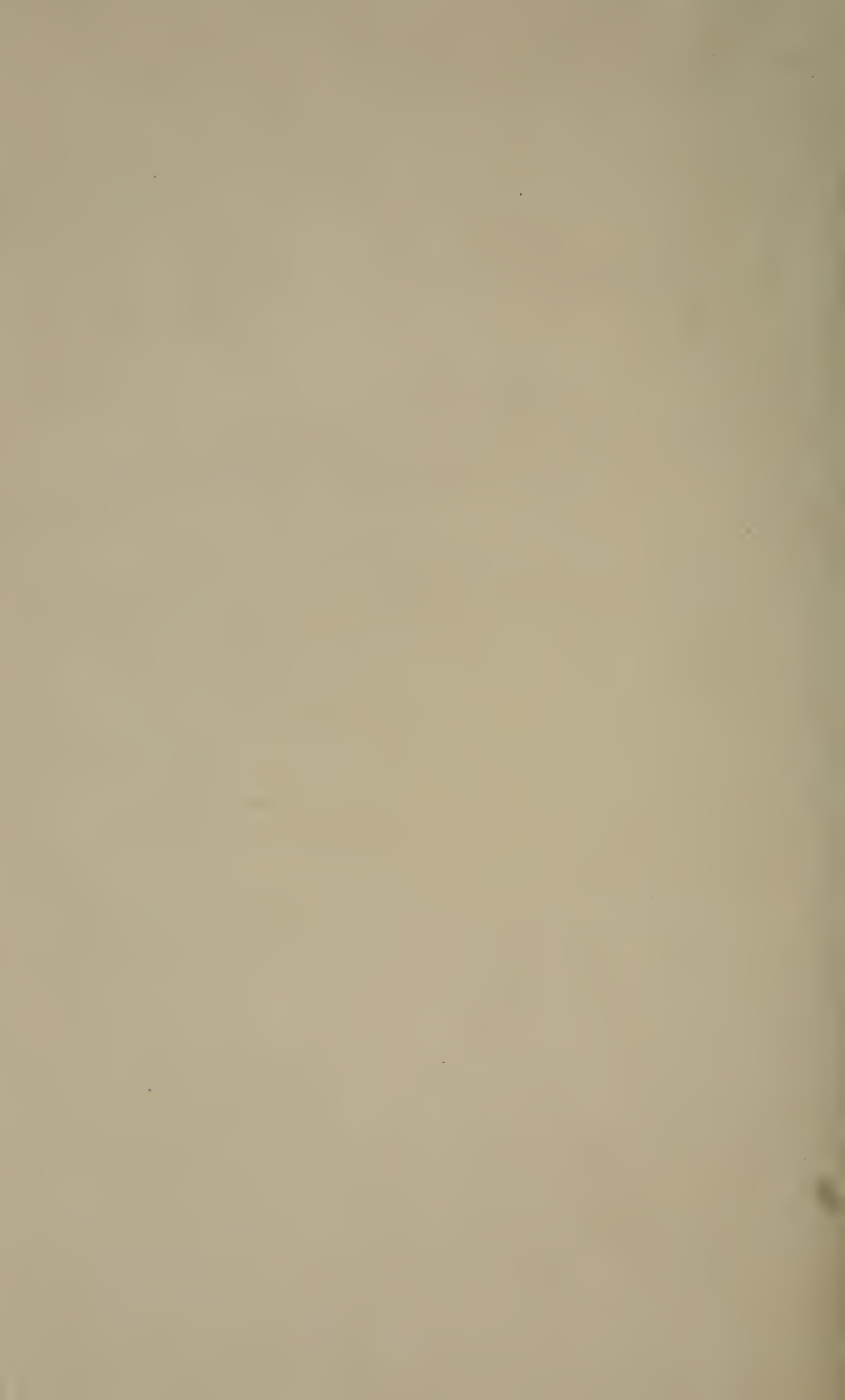
An old woman stood by his side, and touched his arm.

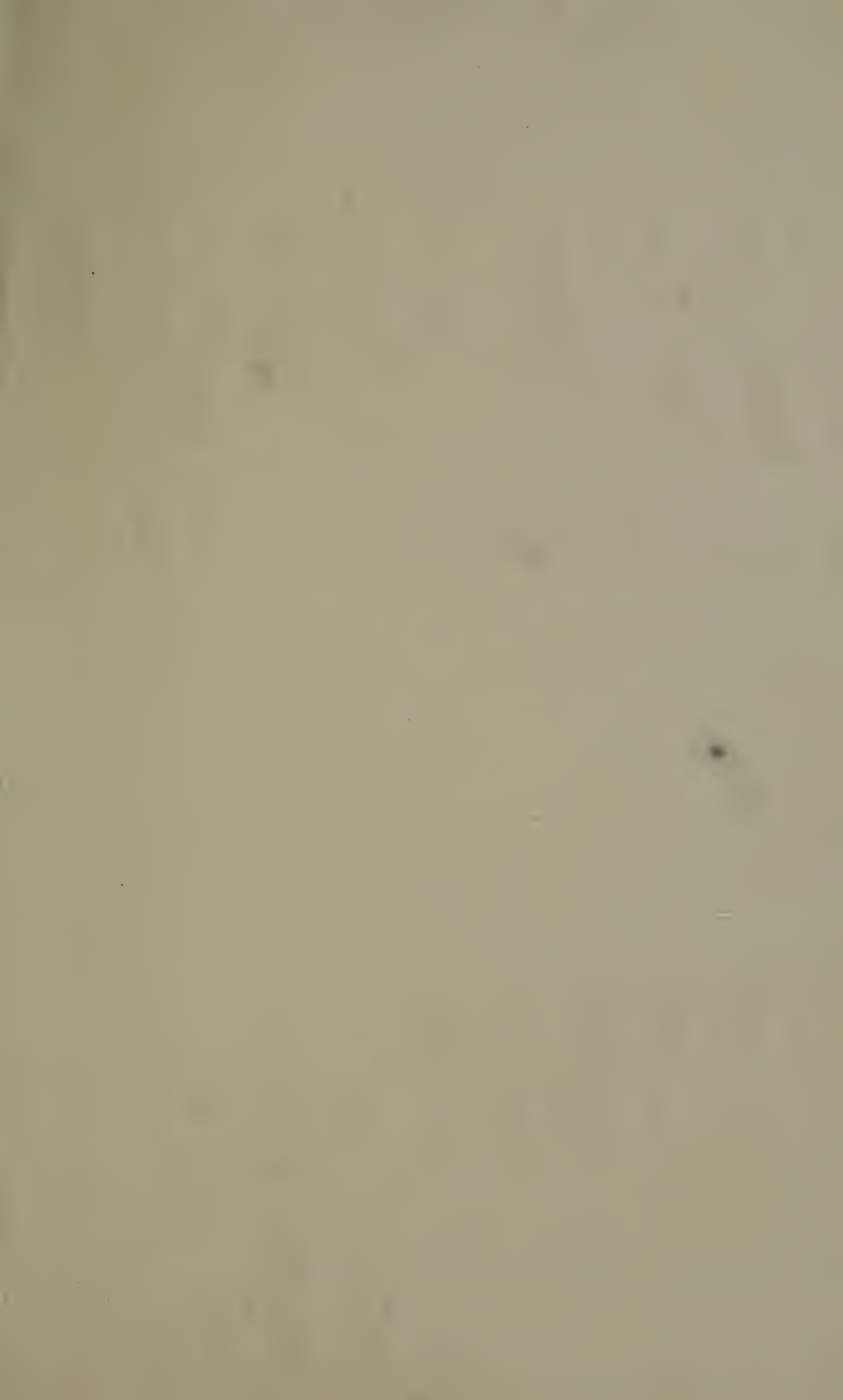
“Dewch,”* she said, and gathering the cloak which he had assumed closer around him, he led the way into the cave.

* “Dewch”—“Come.”

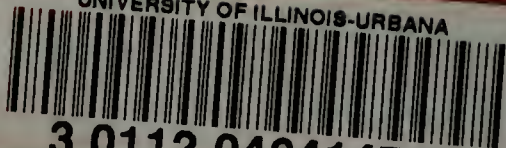
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